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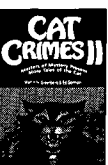
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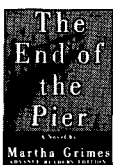
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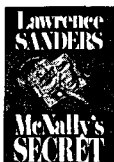
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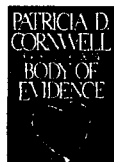
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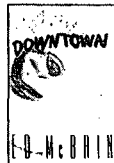
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How to Plan a **MURDER.**

*W*hite-knuckled hands clutched the knife. Nine long years of torture were about to come to a close. It was perfect. But somewhere, way back in the farthest recesses of my mind, I quailed. Something wasn't quite right. Wasn't this the moment I'd dreamed of for the last nine years? And wasn't that my nemesis sleeping a scant four feet away? A sudden tide of bitterness rose inside me. It was the perfect crime. There was no way I'd ever be caught. But still, there were nagging doubts. Something wasn't quite right. What was it? The motive was there - this man had killed my brother. The weapon was there, too. No, it wasn't either one of those. What was the matter with me? Why couldn't I just kill the man? Time was running out, the sun would rise in a mere three hours. But still I waited, deep in thought. Suddenly, I knew why I couldn't commit this crime. I knew what was keeping me locked in a deadly debate with my mind: I'd lost my angle. Not the angle on my knife, the angle on my writing.

I should have seen it from the start. My scope was too broad, my focus was fuzzy, my slant wasn't slanted, and my style wasn't stylish. How could I commit the perfect crime with this kind of writing? I didn't need a better motive. I needed the Palmer Writers School.

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Almost exactly two years ago, in our September, 1990, issue, we published William J. Carroll, Jr.'s first short story, "Silent Warning." That story introduced Warrant Officer Virginiak, looking into the whereabouts of a missing colleague in South Dakota. In this issue, Mr. Virginiak is back, in California this time, where he is drawn into a new puzzle. And we are pleased indeed to have him. William Carroll, his creator, lives in Honolulu and has a doctorate from the University of Hawaii. He has taught political science, edited a small newspaper, and spent nine years in the army—which, no doubt, accounts for Mr. Virginiak.

Our newest author (in this issue) is Jesse Slattery; "Painkiller" is his first published short story. Mr. Slattery is a re-

porter for the New York *Post* and is the author of a novel, *The Juliet Effect* (St. Martin's). He has had a varied career: he tells us that he has been "a government test subject (submarine escape suits in Antarctic-temp water), a clinical chemist, a hypnotist [and] an amateur radio operator."

Jacklyn Butler's "The Messenger" is a particularly original story, we think. Ms. Butler's "A Bit of Flotsam" appeared in our January issue; this is her second submission to us. A Californian, she holds a doctorate in biochemistry, which she taught to freshman medical students, and she has authored or coauthored some thirty scientific articles. She has also written several other (nonmystery) short stories and has traveled to such places as China, Kenya, and Ecuador.

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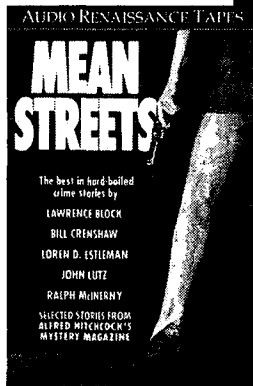
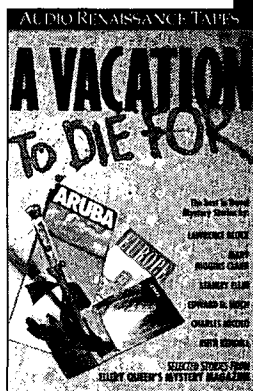
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FICTION

To Kill a Cavanaugh

by Brenda Melton
Burnham

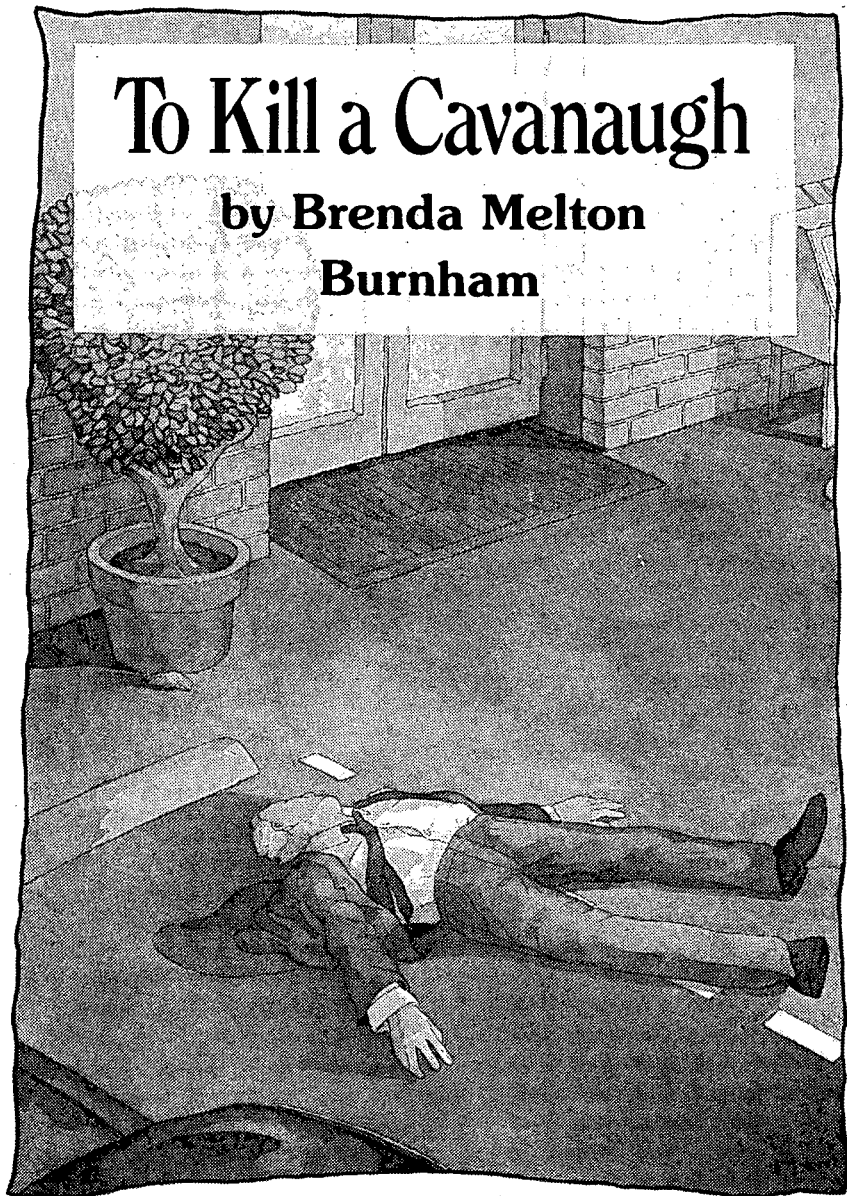


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State Senator William Cavanaugh departed this world from the back parking lot of his own grocery store. The three bullet holes in his upper torso added a certain notoriety to the whole affair. The Golden City *Courier* ran bold headlines for days.

All of which distressed me. No, that's not quite true. I began with sorrow and moved on to distress. Then I became angry.

First off, Willie was my cousin. At one time he and I had been boon companions, before he grew up and became just another typical Cavanaugh male—pompous, silly, and rich.

But that's beside the point. He was a Cavanaugh. As my mother used to say, "Always remember, Jane. Family is what counts."

Who would dare to kill a Cavanaugh?

"The police are handling it," my brother Harry assured me. "Chief Porter will find the killer." He'd been saying that the last four days, ever since Willie was shot.

"Had to have been a drug-crazed hippie," my youngest brother Arthur added. "After the money from the store." He'd been saying that all along as well.

"Maybe it was a drug deal," Harry's son Teddy joked, which made me so mad I sputtered.

"The only thing Chief Porter can find is his mouth when there's food around. A drug-crazed hippie? In Golden City? Everyone in town, including any drugtakers, knows Archie Babcock manages the grocery stores, and their income, for Willie." I didn't bother to acknowledge Teddy's contribution to the conversation.

Harry didn't try to argue with me. "Maybe if we offered a reward?"

"That's good," Arthur agreed quickly. "For information leading to an arrest or something like that."

"We could get it on the *Most Wanted* program on TV," Teddy chimed in, his eyes wide with anticipation. "When they interview me, I could say . . ."

"What we *could* do," I said, "is figure out who might've wanted to kill him."

But none of them could imagine anyone wanting to kill Willie.

I sat in the parlor of my house—which had been my parents' house before me, and my grandparents' house before them—and thought about Willie. The Cavanaughs are a prolific family (one reason why they dominated Kern County perhaps. Another was

that they married money.), so there were always lots of cousins around. We had taken lessons on the piano in the corner, played hide and seek in the dark crannies, dressed up in clothes from trunks in the attic. Outside there was the vast expanse of lawn for games like Red Rover and Cops and Robbers and the orchard beyond for picnics.

Willie had been a scrawny kid with thick glasses and a bad stutter. I had been a plain little thing (My mother, a beautiful woman herself, was always careful that no one should ever call me "Plain Jane." And no one ever did, in my hearing.) with a badly scarred leg from the fire that had killed my sister. In a family where physical attractiveness was the norm, Willie and I did not fit the pattern.

So we were drawn together by a common age (having both been born in that most momentous month: October of 1929) and a common bond. And we had shared a secret, a secret I have never told to anyone. I doubted Willie had, either.

During the summer of our eighth year, when the moon was full, we would sneak out of our beds and find the spot of grass where the light shone brightest. There we performed our "Moon Magic" dance. This consisted of jumping about a great deal and "rubbing" the moonlight onto our bodies, all the while muttering incomprehensible gibberish that we thought added to the spell.

What was the purpose of all this? For me it was to heal the scarred and crooked leg—and even perhaps to make me pretty, I suppose. For Willie it was to make him grow tall and strong and speak clearly. Not that we ever actually told each other these things. There was no need.

Did the magic work? Well, although puberty came to him late, Willie did grow as tall and handsome as any Cavanaugh male. Speech therapy, and increasing confidence, cured his stuttering.

For me the success was less visible. My leg never lost its slight limp. The scars never disappeared. On my best days I was never described as "pretty." But my spine grew straight and my resolve stiff and strong. I consider these traits far more desirable.

But I did not spend all my time woolgathering and reminiscing. I thought about the people who knew Willie. I did not agree with Arthur's theory of some drug-crazed individual. Nor did I believe it was an attempted robbery.

First, of course, there was his wife Imogene. One's spouse should always be considered suspect whenever there's a sudden death, I

think. In any marriage of long standing there must be a number of reasons to wish yourself rid of your mate. (I myself have never been tempted to marry, and from the evidence I've seen, it has been one of my wisest decisions.)

Imogene was a large, lumpy woman with the temperament of rising bread dough. While in personal terms theirs might not have been the happiest of unions, it had been a successful one. Her father had owned a small grocery which he built into a chain that spanned several counties. Her money had helped launch Willie's political career; the Cavanaugh name had helped her overcome the drawbacks of looks and personality.

The next morning I baked a chicken casserole from one of my grandmother's favorite recipes and dropped by to visit the widow.

"Jane, how thoughtful of you," Imogene acknowledged. "Come in." She wisely was not wearing black; it wasn't kind to her.

Her son Leroy and his wife Ruthann rose to greet me as we entered the large living room, painted dark green and filled with heavy furniture upholstered in pink cabbage roses. I'd seen the very same layout in a 1953 *Better Homes and Gardens*.

"How nice of you to come by," Ruthann murmured. She was one of those wispy women who considered murmuring the height of gentility. "So few people bother after the services are over."

"We were just advising Mother that she ought to get shut of this big house now that Dad's gone," Leroy boomed, apparently expecting me to join in his plan. "Too much work. She'd be much happier living with Edith."

His sister walked into the room in time to hear his last words. "Why shouldn't she live with you and Ruthann?" she remarked in a tone that implied the discussion was not a new one. Edith had the Cavanaugh good looks; where she had gotten her sullen disposition was beyond me. "Billy's gone off to college now. She could have his old room."

Imogene smiled and said nothing.

"We were only thinking of you, dear." Ruthann's hands made vague little arabesques. "Since the divorce and all . . ."

The divorce had been a messy one. At one point Willie had actually gotten into a physical battle with his son-in-law, Chip, or so the stories went. In my opinion any man well into his forties who chased twenty-year-old dollies, continued to brag about his former prowess as a high school quarterback, and was still called Chip hardly lent luster to the Cavanaugh family anyway. That he and

Willie had always been at loggerheads was of interest to me, however.

"Where is Chip now?"

"He's moved north to Topeka," Edith answered reluctantly.

Topeka just happened to be the state capital, where Willie kept an apartment while the Senate was in session. I noted the fact before returning to the earlier topic of conversation.

"Do you want to sell the house, Imogene?"

Before she could answer Leroy said, "No reason she should. Ruthann and I could move in here . . ."

"Oh, I see," Edith snapped. "You want the house, but you don't want Mother."

"You know she and Ruthann don't see eye to eye . . ."

"Imogene," I said, above the din, "could I have a glass of water? I forgot to take my pill."

"Of course."

She rose and led me out to the kitchen. I fished around in my purse for a bottle of aspirin to support my excuse to cut her out of the herd.

I dutifully washed it down with the water she provided, then repeated, "Do you want to move?"

She fiddled with her heavy gold wedding set and didn't look at me. "I don't know what to do, Jane. Willie always made the decisions, you know that." She sniffled into a handkerchief she pulled from her pocket. "What am I going to do without him?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake." I rinsed the glass and put it back on the shelf. "He's been off in Topeka these past twenty-five years messing up the state with the rest of those idiots and left you behind most of that time. He bullied you unmercifully when he was here. He went off with that silly little fluff, Tammy Nichols, from the grocery store not long ago and was gone for three days." Shock tactics and hard truths were always the best way to deal with Imogene. Otherwise she puddled around in meaningless pieties forever. "Didn't that bother you?"

"Yes." She continued to twist her rings. In the background I could hear the argument escalating in the living room. "It bothered me a lot. I was so . . . embarrassed. Hurt."

"You should've shot him then and not waited two whole months."

"Jane!" Her head jerked up, and she actually looked me in the eye. "I never would've shot Will. Never."

I believed her.

“**H**as Chip Woodruff been in town lately?” I asked my brother Harry later that day. He and Flora had invited me for dinner before the shocking events of the past week had occurred.

“He was here last week. Something to do with the divorce, I believe. You don’t think he . . .”

“Why not? They never did get along. And if he thought Willie had anything to do with Edith’s decision . . .”

“But he didn’t,” Flora interrupted. “Will didn’t approve of the divorce.”

This was news to me. But then I am not one to encourage gossip without good cause. Which there was now. “Really?” I remarked to my sister-in-law.

She nodded. “He didn’t think it was good for the family name. Especially with him up for reelection this year.”

“I thought he was retiring.”

“Changed his mind,” Harry answered. “Decided to ‘have one more shot at it’ is what he said to me.”

“And the scuffle he and Chip had?”

“Dreadful thing really.” Flora leaned forward in her eagerness to impart the information. “Edith and Chip were going at it pretty strong when Will and Imogene showed up. He yelled at Chip to leave his daughter alone and get out of the house. Well, Chip took offense at that, naturally, and said he wasn’t about to leave his own place. Will said, ‘I’ll see you do,’ and grabbed Chip.” She paused for breath.

“And that’s when Edith jumped in. On her husband’s behalf. Can you imagine? Imogene said it was awful. It took her and Chip both to pull Edith away from her own father. Then Chip yelled, ‘That’s it. I want a divorce. This whole family is nuts,’ and walked out.” Flora leaned back in her chair, exhausted from her tale.

Before I could comment the front door slammed.

“They’re here,” Harry said, getting up from his chair.

I turned to Flora. “I didn’t realize someone else was coming?”

“That’s why we invited you, dear Jane. We wanted you to meet someone special.”

Teddy came into the room with a dark-haired woman beside him. She was rather plain of face and wore a severely-cut navy blue suit over a trim figure.

Teddy took her arm and brought her to me.

“Jane, I’d like you to meet Susan. Susan, this is my aunt Jane.”

"I'm so pleased to meet you," the young woman said. "I've heard so much about you."

Behind her Teddy beamed and Harry loomed anxiously. I had not at all cared for Teddy's first wife, who had died the year before in my back yard in a dreadful freakish accident.

I waited until three the next afternoon before going to the grocery store, figuring it might not be so busy then. I walked up and down the aisles. Tammy Nichols was nowhere to be seen.

"Excuse me," I said to Delores, the produce clerk, "is Archie around?"

"I think he's in his office, Miss Cavanaugh. Would you like me to call him for you?"

"No. I'll go back and talk to him there." Delores was the sort of person who would never dream of telling me I couldn't. Not that I would've paid much mind if she had.

Archie Babcock wore thick, wire-rimmed glasses and bow ties, and had a cowlick that made his hair stick up in the back no matter how much fancy stuff he sprayed on it. The latter gave him a tendency to swipe one hand across the top of his head a great deal.

"Miss Cavanaugh." He jumped up from his chair when I entered the small, crowded office. "Come in. Let me clear a place for you."

He set a box of canned corn on the floor and dusted the seat of the metal chair so I could sit down.

"What can I do for you?"

I figured that as long as I was here I might as well ask him a few questions, too. "What do you suppose Willie was doing in the parking lot at midnight?"

He jerked like a puppet in inexperienced hands, and I remembered, too late, that he was the exact opposite of Imogene. Archie panicked and grew defensive over nothing. His parents were strict Baptists who had raised their son with a heightened sense of guilt that was totally wasted on him. The man was as inoffensive as a tadpole.

"I, I don't know, Miss Cavanaugh. It was his store. He had the right . . ." the poor man gobbled like a turkey.

"I'm sorry," I said, through tightened lips. "I've been so concerned over this terrible incident, I'm not myself." I took a handkerchief from my purse and held it to my face.

Archie leaped to his feet again and was at my side immediately.

"Oh dear," he said. "Can I get you a glass of water? Anything at

all? I am so sorry. This must have been terrible for you."

"I'm just so distraught over Willie's death. I've tried and tried to imagine why he would come down here in the middle of the night." I dabbed the cloth against my eyes.

"I know what you mean. Of course, there was the money . . ."

"The money?"

Archie twitched and rubbed his hand over his hair. "Well, yes. Chief Porter said I was to keep it a secret, but I'm sure he didn't mean from you, Miss Cavanaugh. After all, you're family. There was twenty-five hundred dollars missing."

"A burglary?"

"No, ma'am. I mean, not literally. We—Chief Porter and me, that is—figure Will came in and took it out of the safe himself because there was no sign of forced entry or anything."

That certainly put a different spin on things. It would be galling to think that Arthur's theory might be right after all. "It was very clever of you and Chief Porter to keep it quiet."

Archie beamed. The smallest glimmer of praise was like sunshine to his soul.

"I feel much better just knowing the situation is in capable hands." I rose from the uncomfortable little chair. "Oh, by the way, is Tammy Nichols here?"

"No. She had vacation time coming, so she's off this week. Is there anything else I can do?"

"You've been a great help, Archie. Thank you so much."

He reached to assist me to the door, but managed to stop himself in mid-motion. I pretended not to notice to save face for both of us. People like Archie are so tiring to be around.

Tammy Nichols lived in the Oak Terrace Apartments, a fancy name for a very ordinary structure. I knocked at her door a short time after leaving the store.

Several minutes passed before the door opened a crack:

"Yes?"

"Miss Nichols?"

"Yes."

"I would like to speak to you for a few moments if I may."

The door opened marginally wider. "I don't know what . . ."

"It won't take long."

She paused. I waited. Finally, she moved back, pulling the door with her, and I stepped inside. I suppose some people might regard

her as attractive, but she was definitely not at her best that afternoon. The long auburn hair, which was her best feature, was uncombed, and the cotton duster she wore was wrinkled and stained. Her face tended to be sharp anyway; without its usual layer of makeup, she had a rabbit-like appearance that was most unattractive.

She waved me inside. I looked around and chose an old rocker with one arm missing. She seated herself on the couch opposite, tucking one bare foot under her as a small child does.

"Are you ill?" I asked, amazed even as I did so that I should be concerned about such a slovenly, unappealing creature.

"A touch of flu, I think. I'll be fine." She didn't sound as if she would ever be fine.

"Have you seen a doctor?"

She turned her head and said nothing.

"You're sick about Willie. Is that it?"

I could see her jaw clench. "He was a very nice man."

"Yes. He could be."

She looked back at me.

"And he was very nice to you?"

She lifted her chin very high. "Yes. He was."

"I should think not many people have been, have they?"

To my distress she began to cry. Loud, thumping, messy sobs that got her nose involved with the process as well. "We weren't doing nothing . . ."

"Anything."

"Anything. I know you don't believe that. Nobody would. It's just . . . he liked to brush my hair. For hours and hours, it seemed like sometimes. He even bought a fancy brush, all silver and shiny with some kind of special bristles."

My mother had had a brush like that. So many women did, years ago. I had an instant vision of the aging man using one on that reddish mass. Smoothing it . . . caressing it . . .

"Why, last time he was here I said something silly to him, and he even threatened to . . ." she giggled, "paddle me with it."

I tried not to show my repulsion. Why couldn't the man have just taken her to bed and been done with it, for goodness' sake? What did this tell me about Willie, other than something I didn't want to know? I recalled his mother, Helene, a woman I hadn't thought about in years, with a jolt. She had been a silent, almost invisible person—with beautiful red hair.

The spasm of laughter gone as swiftly as it had come, Tammy

went on, almost unaware of my presence. "He needed somebody to talk to, and I listened to him, he said. He was so smart, you know what I mean? And he was lonely. He said that, too. Can you believe it? Somebody like him lonely? I mean, with all that money, and all those important people he knew?"

I handed her my hankie, since she was obviously in need of it, and said, "Was he here that evening?"

She nodded. "But he left about eleven. Honest."

"What did you talk about?"

"The election. He kept asking me—me!—what I thought. Should he do it or not? I said sure he should, we needed more like him. And he said, well, maybe it would be better if he didn't, after all he was getting older, and I said, no way, he wasn't old. And pretty soon he started getting real excited about it and saying yeah. Yeah, he should do it. You know. Like that."

"Did he give you money?"

Her face took on the sly, rabbity look again, and she didn't meet my eyes.

"Did he give you money that night?"

The chin popped up once more. "No, ma'am. He did not."

I was suddenly very tired. Tired of Willie, tired of this child and her emotions, tired of family secrets. I stood and headed for the door. Tammy got there ahead of me and opened it.

"Do you need money?" I asked as I stepped outside.

"No," she said. Then, "But thank you for asking."

I kept walking.

I lay down for an hour, something I rarely do, before fixing dinner. When I got up, I made a small salad and broiled a chicken breast. They were both quite tasteless, but I ate them and washed the dishes afterward.

Then I sat in the parlor, with a lamp turned low. The older one gets, the clearer the memories of childhood become. Soon, I thought foolishly, I shall be so addled that all I can think of will be events that happened years ago.

Damn Willie anyway. Why should I care what caused this man's death in a parking lot on a dark night? Because we had shared common experiences? Because, years ago, we had been allies for a brief while?

I looked across the room at my mother's picture. "No, my dear," she seemed to say. "Because he is family."

I switched the lamp up another notch and went to the phone. Harry answered on the third ring. After thanking him again for dinner the night before and after a few words about Susan ("Yes, Harry, I agree. She does seem a lovely girl."), I asked, "Do you remember exactly when it was Chip was in town?"

Harry seldom questioned things. He was quiet for awhile, then said, "I think it was on Tuesday. I saw him at lunch as I recall. He said something about picking up some papers from his lawyer."

"Do you know if he was going straight back to Topeka?"

"I'm sure he was. He said he had a fish about to bite on a Seville and had to get back." Chip was a car salesman; "Not just any car, either," as he liked to brag.

"When did Willie decide to run for reelection?"

"Just recently, I think. He made some remark to me a couple of weeks ago about 'wanting to get out of the rat race.' Then, only days before he died, he was saying things like 'having a new lease on life' and 'getting the perspective of young people' or some such. They were all such mundane cliches. To tell you the truth, I didn't pay much attention to any of them. Do they make any sense to you?"

"They might, Harry. Thank you." I hung up and dialed Tammy Nichols' phone number. When she answered I said, "This is Jane Cavanaugh. I'd like you to answer one question for me. Was Willie talking about your moving to Topeka?"

"I wasn't sure I could find work up there, but he said that wouldn't be no problem."

"Any problem."

"Any problem. I hadn't decided for sure, mind you."

"No, of course not. Thank you, Miss Nichols."

So Tammy was the "new lease on life." And if what Chip had told Harry was true, he was long gone when Willie was shot on Thursday night.

What about the twenty-five hundred dollars? Why would Willie need cash in the middle of the night? That made no sense at all. Unless . . .

I needed to talk to Archie one more time. I debated about calling and decided, with his temperament, it was best done in person.

Archie lived in a small bungalow on a quiet street in the older section of town. He answered the door immediately.

"Miss Cavanaugh. What a surprise. Won't you come in? I was just waiting for the ten o'clock news before I retired."

His house had a fussy bachelor look. He had dated Muriel Simpson for seven years as I recall, but when she turned thirty-three and had received no proposal, she married someone else and moved away. Archie had remained happily single.

"Thank you, Archie. I was sitting home alone, and as old women will . . ."

"I could never think of you as old, ma'am."

I waved away his compliment and took a chair. "I got to fretting about something."

He sat down across from me and waited.

"The money. Why would Willie go down to the store for cash in the middle of the night? Unless . . ." I paused, "he was being blackmailed."

Archie seemed startled by the idea. "But what would anyone blackmail Will about?"

"I don't know. Was there any problem with the stores that you know of?"

He shook his head emphatically. "I see all the books. I check all the figures."

"That's what I thought, too. You're much too good a businessman to let something like that slip by you. So it had to be in his personal life."

"I wouldn't know anything about that, Miss Cavanaugh."

"Didn't I hear once that you had political aspirations, Archie?"

He laughed and fiddled with his cowlick. "Not me. I'm just a grocer."

"So was Willie."

"Yes. But he was a Cavanaugh." A note of self-pity crept into his voice.

"He could have named you as his choice to succeed him. Put the word out, so to speak. Spoken for you to important people, that sort of thing. Isn't that the way it's normally done?"

"He was never going to give up that position. Never."

"Not even if the story got out that he was 'fooling around' with a younger woman?"

Archie smoothed down his standing hairs. "Who would say a thing like that?"

"Someone who wanted money, perhaps? Someone who intended to bleed him dry . . ."

"That's not true! I didn't want his money. I . . ." Archie's hair popped up again.

"No," I agreed. "You didn't want money. You only wanted to run for state senator. That seems eminently fair to me."

"He'd promised me. He said, 'Next time, Archie. Next time I'll step down and help you get my seat.' He promised."

"What happened?" I asked, very gently.

"He called me that night. Late. Told me to come down to the store. I didn't know what was happening. I rushed down and there he was, standing in the moonlight in the middle of the parking lot, grinning like a fool. 'Archie, I've changed my mind,' he says. Just like that. 'I'm going to run again.'"

Archie looked past me, maybe seeing Willie as he was that night. "I told him he couldn't do that to me. I had plans. I'm not a young man any longer. I can't wait forever. But he just gave me that silly grin.

"So I said, 'What about you and that Nichols girl? Huh? What about that? Folks wouldn't like it much if they knew about that.' Then he did the strangest thing. He looked up at the sky and that full moon, laughed out loud, and started dancing around like some wild Indian, rubbing his hands all over himself and making these weird noises. I thought he'd gone crazy."

Poor Willie. Dancing the Moon Magic one last time. "Where did the gun come from?"

"I always keep one in the car. In case of robbery, you know. I carry the money to the bank each day. Will bought it for me years ago. I'd taken it out of the glove compartment on the way over there. I didn't know but what he'd found the store broken into or something, the way he called so suddenlike and told me to meet him there." Archie removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I was all tense anyway, and then, when he said what he did and started laughing and doing that stupid dance, I guess I saw red. So I shot him. Several times. I, I didn't mean to. Not really. It just happened."

We sat in his tidy living room and said nothing. I don't know what Archie was thinking about. I was thinking about Willie. He was such an unappealing little boy, and he became such a foolish man.

"What about the money?" I asked finally.

"I took it. I thought perhaps the police would think there'd been a robbery, and Will had caught them at it. They do think that, you know." He put his glasses back on. "I have it in the bedroom, the whole twenty-five hundred. I'll go get it for you right now."

"Not yet, Archie. Just let me think a minute." What was I to do? This ridiculous little man had shot and killed a Cavanaugh. I could ask for a cup of coffee and then slip the arsenic into Archie's cup while he was getting the money. I'd brought the poison with me just in case; the packet had been in the potting shed for years.

But it seemed such a waste of effort and energy.

I could call the police. Tell them what had happened and have them come out and deal with the offender.

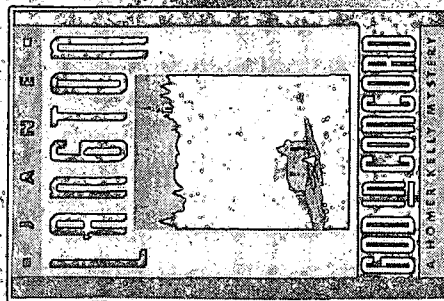
And have the whole ugly story in the *Golden City Courier* for everyone to read? Tammy Nichols? Willie brushing that long red hair? The near-paddling? The Moon Magic dance?

"Archie, about the twenty-five hundred dollars . . ."

The police never did find the party who robbed the grocery store and shot Willie. Archie Babcock ran for Willie's vacant senate seat and won. I follow his activities very closely. Tammy Nichols moved to Kansas City, with a small donation from me to help her get started there. Imogene decided to keep her house. Edith continues to visit Topeka periodically, in some silly effort to get Chip back. Oh, and Teddy is engaged to Susan.

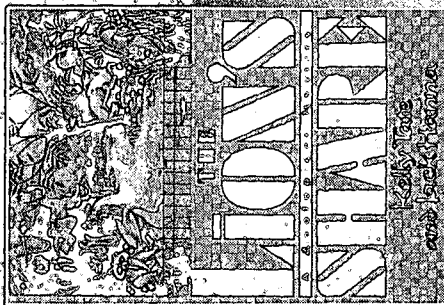
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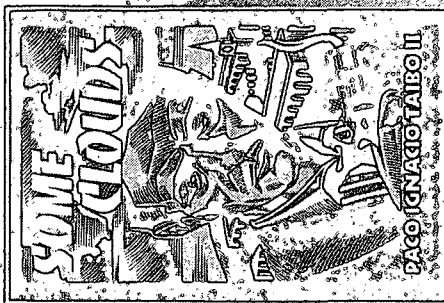
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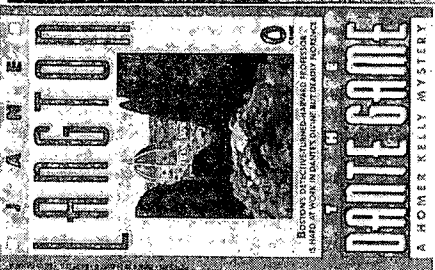
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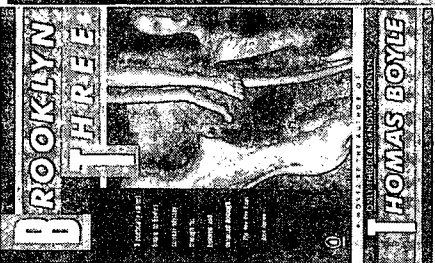


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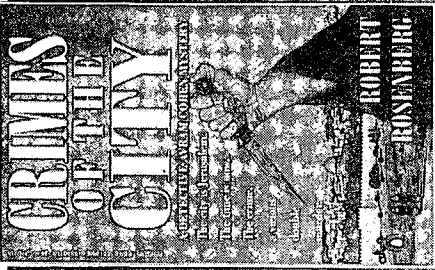
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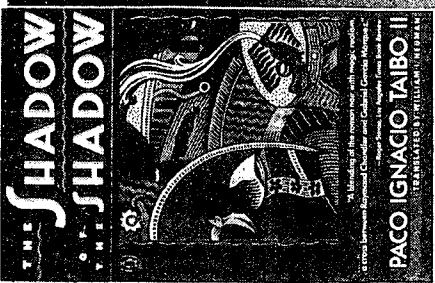
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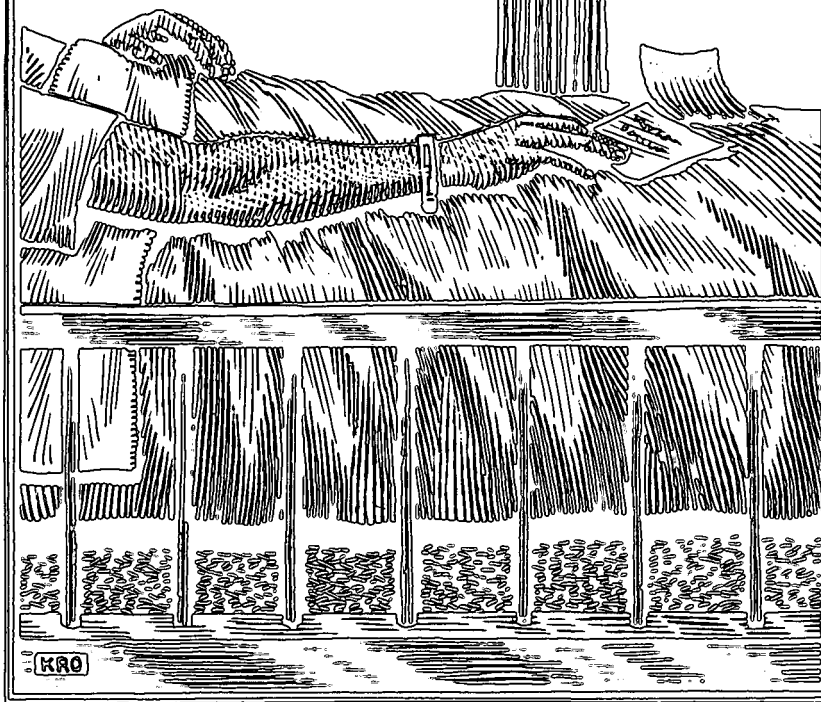


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

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Jake left the business and all his money to his partner Rodney, which would have been nice of him except there was so little of either. Rodney sat in the hole-in-the-wall office south of Market Street where he and Jake had scrounged out a living and thought about Jake's working his butt off for fifty, sixty years only to disappear without a trace. It didn't take Rodney long to decide that wasn't going to happen to him. He figured on using the next ten, fifteen years to make a bundle.

He used some of the money to buy enough shirts so he could wear a clean one every day, closed up the office, moved to a bigger one in a better neighborhood, and raised his rates. Until he could afford to hire a girl, he engaged an answering service to handle calls when he was out. The new office had a door with an opaque glass panel on which gold letters announced PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS, and smaller black letters, below and to the right, ENTER. In the middle Rodney hung a cardboard clock with movable hands and a sign that read BACK AT. He put Jake's big desk facing the door and got rid of the clutter by getting four three-drawer filing cabinets. Two would have been enough right now, but he had hopes,

and anyway it gave the place an air. He completed the desired ambience by getting a fax, a copy machine, a coffee-maker, and a three compartment desk organizer which he kept full but not messy. He'd have to hustle like crazy, but it was going to be worth it in the long run. He'd retire and have time to think about who he was and what it all meant. For the time being he'd forgo one luxury Jake had insisted on: the privilege of refusing to work for anybody he didn't particularly like.

He was just breaking even after a month. He looked around for a gimmick, some stunt that would bring people in, and got an inspiration reading funeral notices in the paper one Monday morning. He called both the *Chronicle* and the *Tribune* and placed an ad to run for three days in their personals section:

CONTACT DEPARTED LOVED
ONES

Arrangements will be made for a terminally ill person to carry a short message to the other side. Call Rodney, 555-5698.

When he got to his office on Tuesday, he took the clock sign down, plugged in the coffee-maker, turned up the venti-

lating system, and lit his first cigarette before opening the papers. His ad, buried in the middle of the classifieds, was set apart by a box and its capitalized caption. He knew a lot of people would see it. In the *Chron* his ad was right under one that started out: GIRLS! GIRLS! GIRLS! and the one just above his in the *Trib* began with ARE YOU POURING MONEY INTO YOUR BANK?

Sure enough, his first nibble was there before he finished his cigarette. Young fellow, in his twenties, probably a college graduate, trying to be nonchalant but obviously a little uncomfortable as he looked around the office before sitting down in the chair beside the desk.

"I got your address from your answering service," the man said. "Nice place. I imagine you charge plenty."

Rodney was glad he'd got the extra filing cabinets. "Like they say, you get what you pay for," he said. This young man was not like his usual customers, but Rodney knew he'd seen him before. Probably a picture in the paper. Maybe on TV.

"What do you mean by a 'short message?'" the man asked.

"Ten words or less," Rodney replied. "The messengers are not in very good shape, of

course. The current one will probably die before the week is out. Can't expect him to learn anything long or complicated." He watched the man take a ballpoint out of his pocket and click the point out.

"How do you give him the message?"

"I visit him every day, during visiting hours." Rodney pushed a notepad toward the man.

The man looked at the pen in his hand as if surprised to see it there. He put the pen back in his pocket. "How much for a ten word message?" he asked.

"Five hundred dollars."

"Phew! How much of it do you keep?"

"One hundred."

"And the terminal person gets four hundred? What's he gonna do with it, bribe the Almighty?"

"Poor fellow has used up most of his money on a long illness. I've promised to slip it to his daughter."

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Not on my part. By the way, which paper do you work for?"

"The *Trib*—hey, howdya know—"

"It's my business, son," Rodney said. "Now, suppose you tell me about yourself. What's your name, and what can I do for you? I charge a hundred an hour, starting now." He crushed the stub of the ciga-

rette and picked up a small clock. He pushed a button on its side.

"You charge a hundred an hour to give you one of these messages? In addition to the five hundred?"

Rodney smiled. "No. That's for interviews. You have a message, the fee includes everything."

"Okay. My name is George Watkins. I'll give you a message."

Rodney nodded and stopped the timer. "The *Trib* gonna pay for it?"

"Maybe. Five hundred bucks, huh? You take a credit card?"

"Of course."

"Can I give any message I want?"

"Not quite. There are some restrictions. No messages that request information, like where did you hide the insurance papers."

"How will I be sure it's been delivered?"

"You'll feel a great relief."

"Relief from what?"

"From the guilt that makes it worth five hundred dollars to send the message."

"What about confidentiality?"

"That's one of my specialties. Nobody on earth but the messenger will ever know what your message is, or that you even sent it. You write it out,

and I'll pass it on to him. Nothing in my files." He indicated the pad and lit another cigarette.

"I'll have to think about how to word the message. I'll come back later. Maybe tomorrow."

This was more than Rodney'd dared hope for. An article in the *Trib* would attract a lot of attention.

At a quarter to two, Rodney set the clock on his door to show he would be back at three and left to go to San Francisco State Hospital. He drove carefully, trying not to hurry, making it easy for the car that was following him to keep up. He parked in the section reserved for patient families; there were always plenty of vacant places. The car that was following him parked close by; George got out just as Rodney reached the elevators. Rodney avoided the elevator that was just leaving, waiting for the other one to descend from the top floor. He punched a button just as George started through the revolving door of the lobby.

Andy was noticeably paler than he had seemed on Rodney's first visit. He seemed tired, more listless.

"No business yet?" He sounded discouraged.

"Not yet, but I expect to have at least one message for you to-

morrow," Rodney said.

"And you'll give Susan some money for each one I memorize?"

"Absolutely."

"It gives me something to think about," Andy said, closing his eyes.

"A man was asking about you," the head nurse told Rodney as he left.

"I know," he said. "I hope you answered all his questions."

"He asked mostly about Andy. Wanted to know if he was really terminal. I told him we don't discuss our patients."

"Did he ask to talk to Andy?"

"No."

"Well, if he does, be sure he keeps it short."

Rodney stopped in the lobby for a cigarette before leaving the hospital. The place depressed him, but he had to cover his ass by visiting somebody there. His stomach had begun to hurt, and so did his jaw. He hoped he wasn't getting a toothache. He reached in his pocket for a Tums. The problem was, he'd had no lunch. The hospital cafeteria was getting ready to close, but he managed to get a burger and fries.

When he got back to his office at three fifteen, George was waiting for him.

"You back already?" Rodney said.

"Yeah. Don't worry about my article. You'll get some good publicity."

"You got a message?"

"Yeah. I was gonna give you a phony, but now I think it's on the square—this is for my brother, Walter." George wrote on the pad: I'm sorry I beat you up. I love you. George. "It's hard to say much in ten words. I sure didn't mean to hurt him." He handed Rodney his credit card.

Now Rodney remembered where he had seen George. His picture had been in the papers some years before, when his brother had died from injuries received in a fight they'd had over some trivial matter; a high school date or something.

"We'd been fighting like that all our lives. I just didn't realize how much bigger I was—"

Rodney handed George the receipt. "As soon as Andy dies, I'll call you so you'll know your message has been delivered."

"Do I get my money back if I don't feel this great relief?"

"Let's discuss that when the time comes."

The five hundred bucks, less the fee for using the credit card service, would more than pay for the ad. But the best part of it was that George's article appeared in the morning paper, right above the obituary sec-

tion. Almost as good as the front page. Rodney saved some money by canceling the last day of his advertisement. Another customer came in the afternoon, just as he was getting ready to leave.

The woman was not young, hair obviously tinted, could be a schoolteacher. He told her it would cost two hundred.

She gave her name only as Marcia. Rodney did not press for more information. If she wouldn't tell him, she'd have to pay cash.

Marcia demanded details. Rodney explained about Andy.

"If there is an afterlife, he will deliver it."

"But—how will I even know?"

"It becomes a matter of faith," Rodney said.

"Will I meet the messenger?"

"He's too sick to have visitors."

"Then how will he get the message?" Rodney could tell she was wavering.

"I have permission to see him once a day. I'll drill him on the message. He'll have it by heart before he dies." Rodney could see how much she wanted to believe him. He handed her the pad.

Thank you, Daddy, for paying my way through school, she wrote. She looked up at Rodney. "I—I never even asked

him over, after I graduated. He—he was a garbage collector. I didn't realize how hard it must have been until my son started going to the university."

Rodney became businesslike. "We have to have some way to be sure it gets to the right person," he said. "There are a lot of people in heaven, I'm sure."

Marcia thought for a while. "Daddy always remembered my birthday," she said. "Even when I forgot to thank him for the presents. Just say Marcia who was born on May 19, 1930."

She counted out ten twenty dollar bills; she had a couple left in her wallet. Rodney didn't expect her to be back, but she might mention him to some of her friends.

Andy was definitely on his way out, a stick figure of a man, the ghastly pallor gradually turning to yellow. He tried to memorize the messages but kept stumbling. Rodney would have told him to forget it, but he thought he'd seen George's car in the parking lot so he better keep it up a while longer. "I haven't gotten any sleep," Andy said.

Rodney found it painful to listen.

"Don't they give you something to help?"

"Oh, yeah. But I never take that stuff."

"You should use everything they give you." Rodney hated the hospital. He wanted to get out of there as fast as he could.

James Cravey was the third person to answer the ad. He was casually, expensively dressed; the business card he handed Rodney showed that he was a software engineer. He frankly admired the office.

"They say there are two kinds of lawyers," he said. "The kind with fancy offices and fancy prices, and the kind willing to operate in a dump and charge moderate rates. I guess the same goes for private eyes, huh? So, what's the tab?" Rodney said it was a thousand dollars. Cravey smiled. "How much do you give the messenger?" he asked.

"I agreed to give his daughter nine hundred dollars per ten words," Rodney said.

"So you keep one hundred?"

"That's right."

"Pretty generous of you. Why not keep it all? Who'd ever know?"

"Yeah. I started by offering him only five hundred. But every time I talk to the poor fellow I get demolished." Rodney was proud of the smooth way he said it.

"You better hope he kicks it

soon. You'll be losing money if you keep this up."

"He's entirely helpless," Rodney explained. "So anxious to earn a bit of money for his family! It's all he has to live for."

Cravey was going for it, hook, line, and sinker. "I know this is some kind of scam," he said, "but it's worth a try. I have a message for a fellow who'd be about my age, name is Carl Hughes." He wrote on the pad, printing block letters: You were the lucky one after all, you big stiff. "Poor Carl shot himself when he heard his wife was having an affair with me. It was a big scandal. I married the girl, and boy oh boy was that a mess! I'm finally divorced, broker, wiser, and happier. But I can't put all that into a message."

He wrote Rodney a check, decorated with a Picasso.

"By the way, is this message stuff a big part of your business?"

"Not really. I do surveillance, stakeout, undercover stuff."

"I should have hired you before I married my ex. Might have saved myself a bundle of grief."

Rodney put the check in his wallet. Enough to keep the office for a while longer. And this bozo might need some help with his next divorce.

* * *

That afternoon Andy was so weak he could not sit up. They'd stopped the I.V.'s because his veins were gone. To wake him, Rodney put his hand on his shoulder but drew it back quickly. His bone was right under the skin, hard and sharp, like a knife edge.

"I'm dying, Rod."

"We're all dying, pal."

"They say it isn't so awful," Andy whispered. "You see this bright light and pass through a tunnel. Everybody will be waiting for me—" He clutched Cravey's message tightly. "Gotta do this for Susan. It's all I can, now—"

Later, in his office, Rodney received a visit from the pastor of one of the nearby churches. The minister accepted a cigarette, looking around as if to see if anyone noticed before he lit it.

The minister said he was appalled at what Rodney was doing.

"Communicating with the dead is not exactly a new idea," Rodney said. "It wouldn't surprise me to learn that Eve tried to contact Abel. Though I suppose the Bible would have mentioned it if she got through."

The minister was not amused. "What you are doing is cruel and dishonest," he said.

"No, no! First of all, it is not

cruel. I am giving a little meaning to the last moments of a painful death. That's a helluva lot more than this man's priest has done for him, believe me. And I am taking a load of guilt off the people who send the messages. What's wrong with that?"

"You're taking money under false pretenses. You know these messages will never arrive."

"I don't know that. I'm going to send one myself, in fact."

At the time, he only said it to get the minister off his back, but after he'd gone Rodney began to think about his late partner, Jake. These were the kind of people Jake would've refused to work for. Rodney could almost hear him: "They're guilty," he'd have said. "They deserve to feel uncomfortable. I'm not gonna help 'em unload." By now maybe Jake realized it was a mistake to have so many scruples. Rodney wrote a message on the pad: Don't you wish you'd thought of this one, you jerk?

He found Andy's bed empty.

"He died last night," the nurse told him. "I think he left you something. Ask the orderly." She turned her back to him.

The orderly was in the lobby.

"Yeah, they don't want to

talk about it. They could get disciplined. Guy'd saved up his sleeping pills, probably took eight or ten. He a relative of yours?"

Rodney felt lightheaded. "No. A friend is all."

"Well, they won't order an autopsy; he was due to kick the bucket any minute anyhow."

"She said he left something for me?"

"Oh, yeah. These slips." He handed Rodney the three messages, wrinkled up from being clenched in a bony hand. "He talked to me just before he cashed in. He said something like he couldn't even do this much for Susan." The orderly stared at Rodney. "Look, mister, don't feel bad about it. It isn't your fault. These terminal cases get like that."

Just to be sure he was covered, in case George followed up and inquired about him at the hospital, Rodney asked the nurse at the desk for the address of Andy's next of kin. She wrote it on a slip of paper, frowning the whole time. Probably thought he was going to investigate the death. Make a stink about all those sleeping pills.

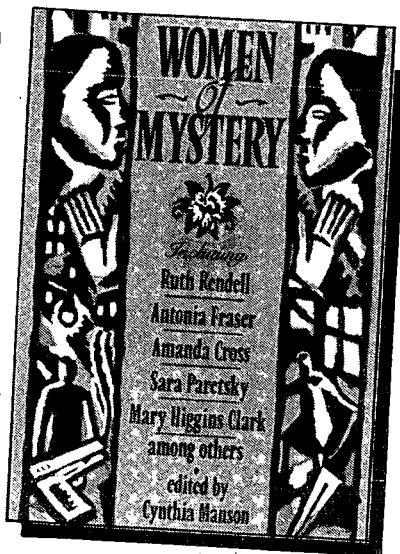
He thought about looking Susan up, passing her a few bucks, but decided that was silly. After all, Andy had failed even to try to deliver any messages. Back in his office he threw Susan's address in his wastebasket.

He knew them by heart, but he spread the notes out on his desk and reread them anyway. He wondered if any of the suckers would dare demand a refund—

He felt a sharp pain in his left lung. Damn, he'd forgotten lunch again. He pushed the messages aside and picked up a cigarette, but before he lit it he felt in his pocket for his Tums. The pain crushed his chest and burst loose, spreading down his left arm and around his back. He tried to reach for his phone but stopped as he saw a bright light at the end of a dark tunnel and heard voices calling him and all the pain stopped.

The janitor found the body facedown on the desk. There was no evidence of foul play, so nobody paid much attention to the scribbled notes on the papers clutched in the hand of the corpse.

TOP WHODUNITS BY THE TOP WOMEN IN THE FIELD



For the first time ever, here are fifteen of the best mystery stories by women taken from the pages of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. Thrilling tales by Ruth Rendell, Sara Paretsky, Mary Higgins Clark, Faye Kellerman, Amanda Cross, Joan Hess, Antonia Fraser and eight other terrific writers are included.

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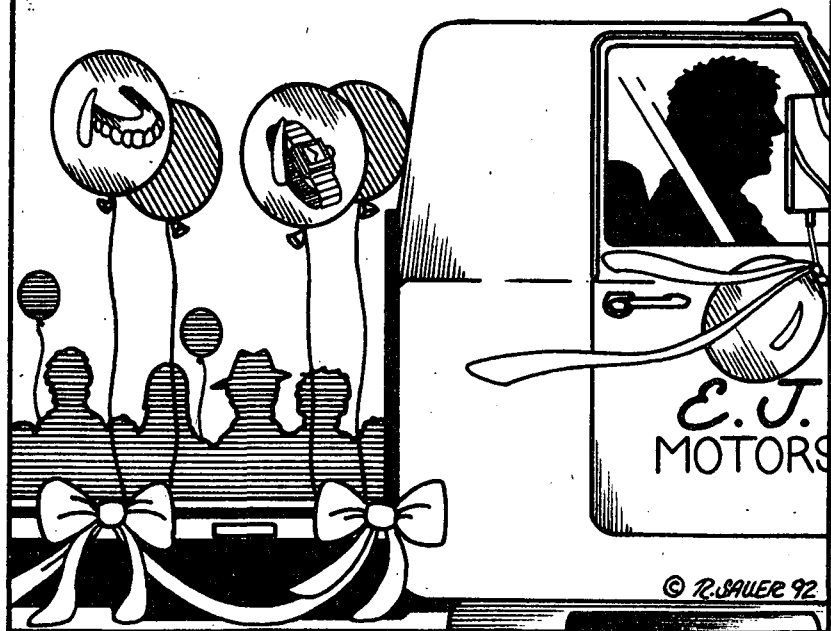
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The Parade

by Jas. R. Petrin



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“Look, see, it’s like this,” Pete said. “The town promised those kids a parade, and they’re goin’ to have a parade if I got to put it on all by myself, dance the two-step down Burton Street in pink tights, a balloon tied around my neck, yo-

deling an’ pushing a wheelbarrow.”

“You don’t have no wheelbarrow.”

“I’ll steal one.”

Pete Melynychuk, meanest man in town, mad at the whole town, banged his first empty beer glass of the day down on

the table in the Netley bar and glared into the five-minutes-past-opening empty silence of the room.

Empty except for Wilmer Gates, who was finishing off his own beer slowly, making it last. Which was okay. He was not as a rule up to Pete Melynchuk's speed for, oh, say, another half hour.

"No Interlake Parade," Wilmer said sadly.

Pete said, "Take and reason it out. What have we got? E. J. goes and disappears to damn-knows-where, his brother-in-law shoots up from Lockport and takes over the car lot. Puts his foot down, says the flatbed E. J. was going to loan for the Oldtimers Band to ride on ain't going to be loaned—and no two or three fancy cars neither for the dignitaries—"

"So the Oldtimers drop out," Wilmer continued, "the—what did you call 'em?—dignitaries? They're all heated up—"

"Mad as hell is what they are." It was Chuck Lang dropping into his seat eight minutes late. "An' you wanna know what else. Lois Park over at the Rexall says the Shriners want confirmation the parade is a go. They don't get it, they say they won't show up here in End of Main neither. Gave us till the end of the week."

"The end of the week? That's

tomorrow!" Pete yelled.

"Don't yell at me, yell at the Shriners."

"Don't yell at the Shriners," Wilmer told them both, "yell at E. J.'s brother-in-law. He's the one caused it all."

Pete told them they all ought to maybe have one more beer and then go on up the road to the dealership and do just that. Some yelling. They said that was a good idea. All of them ready to yell.

Chuck Lang said, "And another thing, E. J. ain't the only human being gone missing around here. Anybody know where old Duffy went?"

"Anybody care where old Duffy went?" Pete replied.

They ordered their beer.

Leaving by the back way (they had reputations to consider), slamming the panic bar, they tramped out of the Netley into the morning sun. The sun hammering them instantly, making them pull the peaks of their caps down low. Every stone of the graveled alley like a smoldering ember put there to burn through the soles of their shoes.

"Hot!" Wilmer gasped.

"My eyes!" Chuck said. "I can't see."

Pete went ahead, leading them to the street. "It's that thing up there—your sun? Like

in astronomy? I'm pointing it out because you boys don't see it much, all them curtains the Netley's got. Asbestos curtains. Don't let the sun shine in."

"It ever does shine in, I'll be toast," Wilmer grumbled.

Pete let out a three-beer belch.

"You're already toast. A dried-out crust nobody wants. Same as us."

"Could be it's what happened to Duffy," Chuck said. "Went out for a walk and the sun got him."

E. J. MOTORS, the sign said, forty feet of plastic and ten thousand little round bulbs that winked on and off at night to make the neighbors mad. The men formed up outside the plate glass door.

"First we'll be diplomatic," Pete Melynchuk told them.

"What, no yelling?" Wilmer complained.

They pushed open the door.

A guy wearing a three-piece suit and a scowl came toward them. One of those guys who knew how to scowl with his mouth open. Face on him like a railroad dick just spotted dead-headers in a hog car. Nothing like E. J., who was a dapper, smiling little man, this guy was big and loud, and kept his hands balled up into fists when he walked. He pointed at the floor.

"What d'ya call that?"

"Huh?" they all said.

"Carpet. Brand new carpet. What is it with you bums, you can't pick your feet up when you walk?"

They looked at their feet.

The rail dick said, "Not even walking. Galumphing is what it is. Galumphing and rooning a rug. Genuine broad-room. Worth more'n the three of you dipped in gold. Whaddya want here, messing up the place?"

"Maybe we want to buy a car," Wilmer said.

"Steal one, you mean."

Pete stepped in.

"Guess you're Unger. E. J.'s brother-in-law. We come to see you about a parade."

"Yeah? Well, here I am, and there ain't gonna be no parade, so you can take off out of here, the three of you, careful and don't slam that thousand dollar door."

Plainspeaking fellah. Up-front guy. You wanted to take hold and bang his bullet head on one of these shiny new car fenders. Pete tried counting, but didn't make it to ten before he had to open his eyes and say:

"The flatbed parked out back, all the streamers on it? We want to know if you're goin' to change your mind and let the Oldtimers use it. Just for the parade. See, they're the show-

piece, the Oldtimers Band, and if we get them back, the Shriners and the others'll show up, too. But we gotta know now. It's important to us."

"You know what's important to me?" Unger said. Pete studied his face. God. Like something you should hang a sign around—DON'T FEED THE ANIMAL. "I'll tell you what's important. You guys hauling your butts out of here before you scare off a paying customer."

Pete ignored him, having his say.

"It'd only be for a couple hours, and we could take up a collection, you're worried about gettin' stiffed for the fuel. You wouldn't be out nothin', except maybe another three, four miles on the vehicle, that's all—"

Unger's voice went up an octave.

"All? Whaddyamean, all? Know what the rig is worth? Rig like that is worth—"

Wilmer broke in. "Worth more'n the three of us dipped in gold? Rubies and opals up our—"

Pete shot him an elbow.

"—ying-yangs?" Wilmer finished.

Pete raised his own voice to try to make the guy see reason.

"Look, Unger—"

"Mister Unger."

"Yeah, you. Will you listen a

minute? The reason this parade is fizzlin' out is because of your brother-in-law vanishing like he did, and we know that's terrible, but life's gotta go on, know what I mean, all the kids lookin' forward to this parade, and nothing being done, so us three are tryin' to be the movers and shakers and see if—"

The big face lit up red.

"Movers and shakers? You guys? Haw! Only moving and shaking you do is coming down off a three day drunk. Triple case of the dancing D.T.'s. A funky chicken marathon in a one room walkup over a liquor store. Losers and fakers is what you are. Two bums and a dope." He jabbed a fat finger into Pete's chest. "You listen to me. You guys are gonna get your butts outa here before I lose my self-control and fieldkick you through that five thousand dollar window—"

"You'd get glass on your rug," Chuck warned him.

"What about the kids?" Pete demanded.

"Kids? What do you know about kids? I bet you don't even have no kids, none that you know about. I got six kids. You don't see me crying about no lousy canceled parade."

"You're not from this town," Wilmer Gates reminded him.

"I am now, pal. So do me a favor. Show me three skinny

backsides going out that door, and don't let me see the frontsides again, either, or I'll tell Chief Robideau you came here to mug me. Maybe I'll tell him that anyway. Give the guy something to do."

Pete heard a voice whisper to him it was headbanging time. He took a step towards the meanmouth in the suit, ready to do damage, and felt Wilmer and Chuck's hands on him, grabbing him, hauling him back, Wilmer saying, "Come on, come on, the slime ain't worth it."

Unger yelling, "Get him outa here! All of you get outa here!" Unger really hot now, walking high up on his toes, face all swollen up like a purple onion.

Pete gave his head a shake. What to do? You grabbed the guy and beat on him and then the kids never got a parade. Or you showed him your skinny backside just as he'd ordered. There wasn't any option. They turned away and galumphed back across the priceless rug, between the shiny priceless vehicles and the five thousand dollar window, pulled open the thousand dollar door, and filed out.

Out in the sun again, Wilmer said, "So what now? More diplomacy?"

"Hell with that," Pete said.

* * *

Mrs. Robideau said she had no patience. She said he ought to know that, after thirty years, she had always admitted it. She said:

"What do you mean there won't be a parade? We've had an Interlake Parade here in End of Main for as long as I can remember. They can't cancel it—I won't hear of it."

"You're hearing of it now," Chief Robideau said. "I just told you." He pointed his fork at the skillet on the stove. "More food in that pan?"

"Can't you save anything for lunches?" Mrs. Robideau got up, angry, and spooned more pirogies onto his plate, an extra dollop of sour cream, another scoop of fried onions.

"And to top it off," the chief told her, "that jerk of a brother-in-law, not satisfied he's got the town boiling hot, giving me trouble. Demanding to know what I'm doing about E. J. Like E. J. was his all-time favorite family member or something. Like I kidnapped the guy myself."

"Tell him you'll do something about E. J. only if he lets the parade go ahead."

Robideau munched and muttered.

"Coerce the guy? All my job is worth."

"You can coerce some peo-

ple," Mrs. Robideau said, as if it were a town ordinance she knew about. "Some people deserve it." Her voice grew husky, conspiratorial. "What you could do, you know, get him in an alley somehow, convince him to change his mind, rough him up a bit? The girls at the Auxiliary were wondering. Policemen do it all the time."

Chief Robideau set down his fork. "I don't do it all the time. Not even *one* time. Where do you get these ideas?"

She sat back. "Okay. Kid the world, but you can't kid me. Like I said to the girls, I know all about policemen, how they operate. I'm married to one." She got up. "More coffee? And there's cookies—I just made them today." She poured the coffee and set a plate of oatmeal cookies on the table.

"The jerk brother-in-law," Robideau said, "calls me up again today. Wants me to arrest Pete Melynchuk, Wilmer Gates, and Chuck Lang. Says they went to the dealership with some wild-ass scheme to extort money from him. Can you believe it? Those guys could barely scheme their way out of bed in the morning—unless the Netley had a free beer breakfast."

He took a cookie from the enormous heap on the plate and chewed it irritably. His

stomach would give him hell later.

"People say you go into the showroom he won't even let you *touch* the vehicles, afraid you'll damage them," Mrs. Robideau said.

"And then Chuck Lang calls me up. He's got a missing person, too. Old Duffy. Can you beat it? Old Duffy. How can a guy with no fixed address be considered a missing person? I says to him, I says, 'Missing from where?' He says, 'Missing from places you always see him.' I says, 'And where's that exactly?' He says, 'I don't know—everywhere.' See what I got to put up with?"

Mrs. Robideau stirred her tea. Still hung up on Unger. Not taking in one word he'd said.

"How about this? You go to the brother-in-law, threaten to charge him with something. Say, being a town nuisance, creating public mischief? Tell him if that's how he's going to be, you got to bring him in for questioning."

"Questioning? What questioning? I can ask him any questions I want right there on the showroom floor."

"I know. But listen. See, if he don't cooperate, this way you can get him alone at the police station. Soften him up in the elevator, the way you do."

"We don't even *have* an elevator."

"A closet, then. You take him into a closet. Show him the floor. Show him he could fall down in there a few times, nobody would know."

"Claudia Webb would know. She's the only one's got a closet. And I'd have to take her coat, her pairs of old winter boots, all her stationery supplies out of it first. Her standing there with the big jerk brother-in-law, both of them watching me do it."

"Claudia would understand. She's a very sympathetic person."

Chief Robideau considered another cookie, and realized he had no idea how many he'd eaten already. He'd need the Tums again. He pushed his plate away.

"You feed me too much."

"I know. That's what you like. Listen, how about this? If you won't do your job, I get some ladies together. From the Auxiliary. We all go down there to the dealership, crowd into his office, close the door, and read him the riot act. He doesn't listen, we threaten to give him a darn good thrashing. That might change his mind. You wouldn't have to know."

"I already know, don't I? And besides, a bunch of ladies in his

private office thrashing him—could be a guy like him would actually go for it. Probably ask you to do it again, hand out black underwear and whips. You don't know the guy. What he's like."

"Well, I got to do *something* about the parade, since you won't."

"There's nothing anybody can do." Robideau thought a minute. "Unless you want to talk to the brother-in-law's sister—E. J.'s wife. The jerk is only managing the place. She owns it. Or she will sooner or later if her husband never gets found."

The telephone rang. Mrs. Robideau, her face come to life at this new idea, went to the sideboard to answer it. She listened a minute, then turned to the chief, suddenly grim.

"It's the detachment at Selkirk. Somebody found E. J. And he's dead."

"He's dead, all right," the Ident corporal said.

It was a body. Human, too. But you could only just make that out. At first you thought you were seeing a mannequin, something dragged out of a department store fire all rigid and crusted and shrunken. The limbs drawn up. Like the guy had been saying his prayers when he suddenly exploded



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into flames—God's way of telling him, don't you lie to me, son.

The left fist clenched—I'll get someone for this!

No right hand there to make a fist with.

Robideau was surprised they had I.D.'d the body so quick. Surprised they had been able to do it at all, considering what they had to work with. The Ident corporal told Robideau they couldn't have done it except for the jewelry and the teeth. The ring on the missing hand had melted, a small misshapen mass of silver on the oxidized metal of the door—the car, what was left of it, lying on its side. But on the left hand the wedding ring was still recognizable. Also a roasted Rolex. E. J.'s wife had stopped by, identified the jewelry, and then gone into some sort of shock. They'd had to cart her away and sedate her. The other thing they had was a half-destroyed plate from a set of dentures, identified by E. J.'s dentist. The dentist said E. J. hadn't had a natural tooth in his head, that this was part of a new plate he'd fitted him with just a few weeks ago.

"Dental records. Can't beat 'em," the Ident man said.

They drove out to the wreck. As they ducked under the yellow police tape, the corporal ex-

plained how he figured it happened. The car was traveling too fast for the road. It went into the ditch with a full tank of gas.

"The way I see it, how it blew up, is probably the gas tank tore open on this rock. See here? And all that fuel hurtling forward like that—well, you got your inertia, don't you? Raw gas soaking the car, reaching the hot exhaust manifold. Boom. Or maybe there was a spark."

"You know for a fact the car had a full tank of gas?"

"We know by the burn marks."

"You don't seem too sure," Robideau said.

"Oh, I'm sure all right. That's how it happened. No other way when you think about it."

Robideau wasn't ready to make up his own mind on that just yet.

The movers and shakers galumphed back down Burton Street, galumphed through the lobby of the Netley, and dropped down in their chairs.

"What we got to do," Pete Melynychuk told them, "is find some way to put pressure on that guy. See, that's the problem. Want to move a stump, you need a lever."

"I'll lever him," Wilmer

Gates said, "you gimme a jack handle."

"I'm speaking figuratively."

"So am I. It's the way I figure it. Just whack him one."

"How else you gonna make people do what they don't wanna do?" Chuck Lang wanted to know, rubbing the mouth of his freshly opened beer bottle under the arm of his stiffening shirt to sanitize it. Taking a swallow. "I mean, if you don't get physical."

"There's ways," Pete said.

"Like what?"

"You would ask, wouldn't you? Lemme think." Pete considered the problem, then smacked down his hand. "I got it. Blackmail."

"Blackmail?" The other two men glanced at each other, then back at Pete. Chuck said, "Yeah, that might work, only blackmail him with what? We don't know nothing."

"We find out something, that's all. Learn a secret."

"How do we know the guy's got any secrets?"

"Jerk like that? Must have a whole damn mess of 'em. Thing is, to get our hands on one we'd have to, I dunno, go through the man's things or something."

"We wouldn't get near anything, not even his garbage, now he knows what we're after."

"I wasn't thinking about us," Pete said, rubbing the stubble on his unshaven cheek. "I was thinking about a professional." He grinned at them suddenly. "Garbage, huh? What's Ginger doing for excitement these days?"

That was her name—Ginger. Ginger Rogers is what they called her on account of she had worked in show business once—part of a high-kicking topless lineup in Reno or Vegas, someplace like that. Maybe Atlantic City.

A whole lot of years ago.

They found her between two enormous green garbage bags under the fire escape at the back of the Netley Hotel.

"Nice luggage," Pete said. "Matched set of Hefty bags, right?"

"That's right," Ginger told him. "And I'm looking for something to skin, and make better ones—so watch it."

Pete said he was kidding. He explained the situation. "See, we need you to help us out. Help the kids out, I mean. Go down to E. J. Motors and poke through the stuff they've tossed out, see what you can find. Papers that might be incriminating. Might be bushels of 'em. Only you got to hurry and do it before the BFI truck hauls it away."

Ginger got to her feet. She looked vaguely puzzled.

"Must be serious. What would the FBI want with a car dealer's trash?"

"Not the FBI—the *BFI*. You know—that big blue truck can pick up and swallow a ton of garbage at one gulp? Beating your time? You got to get there first. Think you're spry enough?"

"I'm spry," Ginger said. She hiked up her dress. Showed them black stockings and garters. "See these legs? People use to pay money to see these legs. I'd put on spike heels, dance right up a man and down his other side. You should of seen his face."

"Ouch," Wilmer said. "I bet."

She dropped the hem of her dress. "I can dance over there and through that trash in five minutes. But why should I?"

"Because," Pete told her, "the kids need you to."

"The kids, huh?"

"That's right."

"I was a kid once. A dancing phenomenon." She was silent, mulling it over. Then she said, "Okay, I know what you're after, you wanna get some dirt on that guy. You guys watch my bags—I mean my luggage—I'll go do it right now. For the kids."

"Good girl," Pete told her. "And how about this—I'll make

sure you get to dance in the parade."

She walked away from them, and Chuck Lang called after her, "By the way, you don't know where Duffy's got to, huh?"

"I noticed he's missing, that's all." She grinned. "Dance in the parade, eh?"

She struck a pose, and then went off down the street with her hips swinging.

Wilmer let out his breath and said, "Jeez, I bet she really *does* have nice legs, you take and scrape all that dark stuff off."

"That was her stockings," Chuck told him.

"Oh," Wilmer said.

"Some lady's coming over," Mrs. Jentzen said, "that's all I know."

"You should of put her off."

"You're right. But she was so—determined." Mrs. Jentzen hurried to defend herself. "Anyway, what harm can it do? She probably wants to console me over E. J. She could get suspicious if I told her to get lost."

"There you go," Unger said, "the way you always do to win an argument, twisting the situation. Tell her to get lost! There's other ways, you know." He got up out of E. J.'s La-Z-Boy, closing it up with a *clunk*, and looked out the window.

"Just make sure and don't tell her nothing. What'd you say her name was?"

"I forget."

"Well, don't forget this—say the wrong thing like you usually do, and I'm going to be very unhappy about it." He turned.

"Think you can remember that?"

"Don't worry."

"I got to worry. Do both our shares. I haven't slept in three days, I worry so much."

She went to him, nestled close up behind him and pressed her cool hands against his skin. "There, there," she said, "you like this, don't you? And this?" She said, breathing close to his ear, "I'm glad you're a foster brother, not a real one."

She could feel him beginning to respond. He said, "Just make sure you don't say the wrong thing."

Mrs. Robideau sat in the chintz-curtained room with E. J.'s wife, Mrs. Jentzen, who said to go ahead and call her Dora. Mrs. Jentzen was one of the few people in End of Main that Mrs. Robideau didn't know very well. Not from around here. She'd been raised on a farm down at Stony Mountain, three quarter-sections of waving wheat with the federal prison over there on the hill like a monastery. Men in cells,

she said; you could see their lights wink out at night.

"I used to look across the fields at that great stone mass in the starlight and wonder what those men were doing, how they could exist like that." She had a husky sort of voice. Composed for a woman who'd just learned her husband had got burned up. "Year after year, all alone."

"Alone?" Mrs. Robideau said.

"I mean—you know—without women."

Mrs. Robideau looked at her. E. J.'s wife was a handsome woman in her mid- to late thirties, good complexion, full-figured up above with a tiny cinched-in waist. She liked primary colors, had on a green silk blouse, a long, pleated skirt, and wore her blonde hair pulled up at the back. Something seductive about her. Mrs. Robideau imagined her in bed, dreaming of imprisoned men.

"Lots of kids? Or just you and your brother?" Mrs. Robideau asked.

"Just the two of us. Mom died giving birth to me. Mike came along later."

Mrs. Robideau had trouble with that, frowning over it, trying to work it out.

"I mean," Mrs. Jentzen came back quickly, "Mike was older. But he got farmed out young. To an aunt. He came back to

live with us when I was in my teens." She straightened a pleat on one knee, looking flustered.

"So soon as you could, you married E. J.?"

"No. Not right away. I didn't meet E. J. till—oh, let's see—I must have been nearly thirty."

"Then you can't have been married long," Mrs. Robideau said, meaning to flatter her, watching a delicate smile trace itself across that pretty face. "This must be difficult for you."

"Yes," Mrs. Jentzen said. "It is. I think a lot."

"You must be glad to have your brother here."

"Mike's a pillar of strength."

He's a pillar of something, Mrs. Robideau thought. She said: "I guess this is a bad moment to mention it, but we're pressed for time. I wanted to ask, do you think you could arrange to have the truck and cars provided for the Interlake Parade like usual? They've been trying to arrange it through your brother, but he won't agree to it."

Mrs. Jentzen sat gazing back at her with misty blue eyes. Look at me; what do I know of business? I've got the sex lives of convicts to think of. She took a minute or two before answering.

"Well... I've put all those matters in my brother's hands.

He's been so darn good about it. If I overrule him, well, it wouldn't go down well, would it?" Soft eyes, round face, full breasts lifting that green silk. "I mean, I would love to see the parade go ahead, but what can I do?"

What can you do? Heck, you can hop on the phone and order that brother of yours to stop being such a poop, Mrs. Robideau thought. But she knew that wasn't something this creature was ever likely to do. Mrs. Robideau thought the heck with it, and stood up.

"I won't intrude on you any longer. I just wanted to ask, and to tell you how sorry I am about E. J."

"I'll miss him," Mrs. Jentzen said. "His little ways. I'm sorry now I yelled at him about his teeth in there." She waved at the bathroom.

"His teeth?"

Mrs. Jentzen seemed to think she'd said something she shouldn't. "All I mean is, he bought these new teeth, you see, they cost a fortune. But he wouldn't wear them, and so..."

She didn't seem to know where to go from there. They wandered to the door. Mrs. Jentzen changed the subject.

"Your own husband," Mrs. Jentzen said, "what does he do?"

"Gets on my nerves," Mrs. Robideau said. "The rest of the time he's the chief of police."

Mrs. Jentzen stood with the door open, staring.

"I wish I could say he was somebody else," Mrs. Robideau said, "the dog catcher or something, but I can't. Well, goodbye."

Going down the sidewalk to the street, Mrs. Robideau wondered what Dora Jentzen did spend her time thinking about. Convicts without women? She certainly wasn't dwelling on the loss of her char-broiled husband.

“At least if you come home for lunch you could take and put your dirty dishes in the machine. You could do that much, couldn't you?” Mrs. Robideau shut the door of the dishwasher and then came and sat at the table. “So what did E. J. look like, coming through all that fire?”

“You don't want to know,” the chief told her. He helped himself to more bread, mopped up some stew with it. “You wouldn't of recognized him. Nobody would.”

“Really? What makes them think it was him, then?”

“Jewelry he had on. Wedding ring, a watch. And what's left

of his teeth, they found that stuff there at the scene.”

Mrs. Robideau was staring back at him, chewing very slowly, and very slowly shaking her head. “No,” she said, “no, it can't be right.”

“What can't be right?”

“His wedding ring. I don't know if he owned one, but I know he never wore it.”

“How do you know that?”

“I saw him lots of times. And he never wore one. Women notice these things. His hands were all tanned, and he never even had a pale mark on his finger, which is what you'd expect if he wore it much. Just a minute.” She got up and rummaged through a drawer. “Sure. Here it is.”

She slid the latest copy of the *Netley Businesswoman's Monthly* in front of him. All six pages of it.

“I was saving this because of the recipe there on the back page for Nanaimo bars. You like them so much. Look at that picture.”

The front page had a closeup shot of E. J., posing in front of E. J. Motors, grinning and wearing an Interlake Day badge and holding a helium-filled balloon in his raised left hand.

“See,” Mrs. Robideau said, “like I told you—no ring.”

“You're right,” the chief said.

"But I can't tell if he's got a tan line or not."

"Believe me. He doesn't."

Robideau stared at the photo. Old E. J., just a-grinning. Not knowing he was going to be incinerated.

"Another thing."

"What's that?" Robideau asked.

"I was thinking about something else you just said. That they found part of his teeth."

"Bridgework, actually."

"Yes. But Mrs. Jentzen as much as told me E. J.'s new teeth were still there at the house. Something about how he wouldn't ever wear them."

Robideau gazed across the table, across the basket of napkins, the wooden salt and pepper shakers. He said, "He'd hardly go out, would he, without any teeth in his head, off to the city for a business meeting."

Mrs. Robideau lowered her eyebrows. "That's not what I mean. I mean it's more likely he'd of been wearing his *old* teeth, if he wouldn't wear the new ones. But since the dentist identified the *new* teeth he'd made for E. J., I wonder was he wearing the new teeth, or the old teeth, or just what?"

"You've come up with a darn good question," Robideau said.

"I know," Mrs. Robideau said. "So why don't you come up

with a darn good answer?" She added, "By the way, I did some phoning around."

Robideau came alert right away. When you were on a case, and Mrs. Robideau told you she had done some phoning around, you listened. She said:

"This I got from Sheila Dirks. I knew she had a boyfriend in Lockport one time, she called around and phoned back—she *loves* to gossip—if you can't say a bad word about somebody, don't say nothing?—"

"Yeah, yeah," Robideau said, waiting for it.

"She said *they* said Unger is weird."

"I'll buy that."

"She said *they* said he's got some kind of fetish about neatness. Can't stand anything around him to be messed up or broken. But here's the interesting part—she told me they're not actually a real brother and sister."

"Who aren't?"

"Unger and Mrs. J. She told me they're both foster children, from different families, the Ungers took in and raised them. Neighbors thought the two seemed closer than was healthy. Then they took the boy, Mike, away in his teens to a reformatory for a while."

"What for?"

"Setting fire to things. People there called him the Fire Man."

She complained, climbing up into the cab of the truck, saying she didn't see why they had to go to all this trouble, saying it made her feel like some sort of a criminal, saying why couldn't they just go for a walk or something? Unger telling her about things the police had nowadays—bugs they could plant in your house, fit them under a tack; and microphones they could aim like a rifle and pick up your voice half a mile away.

They shut themselves in, and he was angry all of a sudden, letting it spill right out.

"I told you to put that woman off! Didn't I tell you that? And now look! It turns out she's the chief of police's wife!"

"But I didn't know that before."

"I would have. If you'd only remembered her name!"

They sat and looked out the split windshield of the truck, high up above the cars at the back of the lot. She could see the decorated flatbed off to the right, streamers hanging straight down like someone had thrown cold water on them. But after all, somebody had. They'd done it. Her and Mike.

"He sent her to spy," Unger said.

"I don't think so. She seemed very nice."

"Of course she seemed nice. To make you blab. And you did blab, didn't you? Tell me what you said."

She shrugged. She looked at her hands in her lap. Small white hands that had never hurt anybody. "We talked about E. J., that's all. I said I missed him. Not that I asked you to kill him."

"You say that so smooth. Like it was nothing at all."

"Isn't it?" she asked. Opening her eyes wide. Leaning over and kissing him.

"The hell's it all mean?" Pete asked them, meaning the jumble of papers Ginger had just dumped on the table in front of them there at the Netley.

They sorted through the stuff. Envelopes, computer printouts, even brown paper bags, and nearly every square inch of them covered in E. J.'s scrawled signatures.

"Could be some sort of a nervous habit he had," Wilmer offered. "Writing his name. I knew a guy once used to add up columns of numbers, any numbers at all, it didn't matter, he couldn't stand to see a blank space without writing a number in it."

"My ex-wife was like that," Chuck said, "with blank checks."

Pete said pay attention, this

was serious. "What this is," he said, "is somebody practicing E. J.'s signature. Somebody planning to rip the guy off. Pull some kind of forgery."

Wilmer said, "That rotten brother-in-law?"

"Who else?"

Chuck grinned. "Then we got him. We only got to take all this and show it to Robideau."

Pete shook his head.

"Not so fast. By itself this ain't enough. We don't know who wrote it out. I mean, we can't prove it, can we? Robideau'd laugh us right out of the room."

"There'll be fingerprints," Wilmer said.

"Sure. But so it's got the big creep's prints on it? It came from his office. He could of handled the paper *before* the forger got it. Robideau'd know that. Supposing he even checked it for prints, which he wouldn't, not unless we give him more to go on."

"Well, we can't," Chuck Lang said.

Wilmer Gates sighed. "There's Plan B, shot to hell." He bent over his beer.

Pete burped and frowned.

"Okay, so Plan A and Plan B didn't work. We go to Plan C, which is close to being sheer desperation. Listen. I phone the Shriners, pretend I'm on the council, tell 'em the parade is

confirmed, to come on up with their outfits and motorcycles—"

"Jeez," Wilmer said. "But we still got no truck for the Oldtimers, no cars for the dignitaries—"

"Did I say I was finished yet?" Pete dabbed his finger in the foam of his beer and began drawing on the table. "This is the dealership. This is the lane *behind* the dealership. . . . You guys paying attention?"

Parade day.
Unger was just screaming.

"Crooks! Criminals! Stole my big White sleeper, tied on that dingle-balled trailer—I should of stripped the damn thing while I had the chance! A White! Know what a White costs, Robideau? Know what it *costs*? You got to chase 'em, arrest 'em. Do it *now*!"

"Take it easy," Robideau said.

"Never mind 'easy'! A truck thief is worse'n a horse thief. An' you know what we did to *them*! Back when the law was on *our* side!"

There was a huge blast of air brakes outside the police station. Robideau stood up and looked out the window and saw Pete Melynchuk easing a big White up to the curb at the corner of Burton and Third. Decor-

ated flatbed in tow, all fluttering balloons and streamers. Members of the Oldtimers Band were already clambering up on the back with big grins and handshakes, while kids buzzed around them, eyes big as the Interlake Day badges shining on every chest.

On the phone, Unger was getting more and more hostile.

"It's your job, chief! Your *job*! We're talking major crime here. If I was a cop, I'd shoot and *kill* somebody!"

If you were a cop, somebody'd shoot and kill you, Robideau wanted to say. Instead he said, "I know what I have to do. You'll have your truck back."

"Then hop to it, chief!"

"Oh, I will," Robideau said.

He hung up, shrugged into his suit coat, and went through the outer office and out onto the sidewalk.

Pete Melynychuk had the big rig idling. Kids were scurrying into all the shops and watering holes to locate and bring back Oldtimers. Other kids were arriving with musical instruments. One by one the old fellows appeared, beaming, and helped each other onto the flatbed. Somebody brought folding chairs, began passing them up and around.

Robideau saw two shiny cars pull in behind the rig. New convertibles with their tops down.

Wilmer Gates was driving one; Chuck Lang the other. Kids started taping flowers to the chrome.

Claudia Webb stood in the office doorway shouting something about Unger being on the phone again. Something about him just discovering there were a couple of cars gone missing, too.

Convertibles.

Pete Melynychuk looked down from the cab, one arm hooked over the door. Gave Robideau a thin smile.

"Guess you'll be wanting to see me after this is all over, huh?"

"In my office," Robideau said.

"Figured so. I'll be there."

Robideau said, "I know you will."

Someone called that they were ready to roll, and Pete let the air brakes off with a loud, brassy chirp.

"See you later," Pete said.

He let out the clutch, the big White shuddered, and he led the convertibles away to the staging area where the Shriners and the rest of the floats were waiting.

The parade was terrific. Later everybody said so. Best damn parade, they all said, in ten years. You couldn't beat it, they said.

In the cab of the big White,

Pete Melynychuk enjoyed it more than anybody. Rumbling along the street, high above the action, watching the Shriner bike brigade zip and zoom. Watching the clowns, the go-carts, the pretty girls perched ahead of him on the Fish Queen's float all in their bathing beauty outfits. Watching Ginger on a float doing high kicks for the crowd. He felt better than he had in years. He thought, hey, lookit those kids grin. He spotted Robideau in the crowd, lurking. But, hell, deal with him later. It was fun-time now.

He reached up and let the air horn rip.

Wow! See the kids jump? And then all laughing fit to bust? Treat 'em to another blast. Sure. He reached up.

"Hey, *pssst*, Pete, old buddy."

It was Pete's turn to jump, startled by the sharp, forced whisper so close that it stirred the little hairs at the back of his neck.

"You're Pete Melynychuk, aren't you?" the voice asked.

Pete stole a quick look.

He couldn't believe it. There behind him was none other than good old E. J., or maybe his ghost, the face so pasty-looking, poking past the curtain that partitioned the sleeper compartment off from the cab.

"Watch it," E. J. warned.

Pete swung his eyes back to the road in time to correct the big truck, which was beginning to veer toward the crowd all packed in there along the curb.

Pete hollered, "Where'd you come from?" Glancing in the rear view, seeing E. J.'s face filling it. Guy looking like he hadn't had a bath or a shave in a week. A lot like Wilmer and Chuck. "You're supposed to be dead," Pete told him.

"I know," E. J. said. "Guess I blew that, huh?"

"What happened, you came back to life? Didn't like it there, all them hymns and harps?"

"I like country music."

"Me too. But—"

"Sure. You wanna know why I went away in the first place."

"Insurance scam?"

"Nope. I'll tell you. Ever hear of the midlife crisis? The male menopause?"

"You mean like where men all run out and buy sports cars?"

"That's it. Well, I got it. A bad attack. And sports cars couldn't do it for me, cars being all in a day's work, if you know where I'm coming from."

"Nope."

"Fine," E. J. said. "But try to understand. Getting away was my idea. I admit that. But the rest of it, all what's happened—no. I had nothing to do

with any of it." He was lounging on his side in the sleeper now, his head propped on his elbow.

"Getting away," Pete repeated.

"Sure. Haven't you ever wanted to get away from the pressures of life? Pull the pin, and head on out?"

Pete had to think. Decided, no, he hadn't. Head on out from what? The Netley and that first cool beer that felt so good sliding down his throat in the morning? "Guess not," he said.

"Well, I did. Start a new life."

"I dunno how you start a new life by killing yourself."

"But I *didn't* kill myself, did I?"

Pete looked at him, the big White veered again, and again he had to move quickly to straighten her out.

"It was on the radio," Pete said. "They found your body. Your own wife identified you. Said you were dead, all right."

"Now we're getting to it," E. J. said. "It's why I came back. To see what was going on. I couldn't show myself, not just yet, so I've been sleeping in the truck. I got a key, see. The thing worried me, got me back here, was, if it wasn't me in that wreck, who was it?"

Pete was beginning to have a horrible thought.

"Know something? You ain't

the only one who's missing around here."

"I ain't? I mean, I'm not?"

"No. Old Duffy—he went missing, too."

E. J. sucked in his breath. "Old Duffy?"

"Yeah, and come to think of it, he kinda looked a lot like you, a short round little fella, didn't he?"

They exchanged glances.

"My God," E. J. said.

"Whaddya think?" Chuck asked Wilmer, both of them leaning against the brown brick wall of the Rexall and watching the parade roll by, all the clamoring kids. "Guess we did her, huh?"

Wilmer nodded. "Guess we did."

"Only one thing," Chuck said, "all these damn papers." He kicked the bulging liquor store bag that sat on the sidewalk between them. "What do we do with this stuff?"

Wilmer shrugged. "I dunno."

"Well, I ain't lugging it around the rest of my life, that's for sure."

"Just take and toss it."

"Destroy evidence? Go to prison for that. Nope, I think what I got to do..." Chuck pointed into the crowd. "Ain't that Robideau there?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, that solves our prob-

lem; don't it? I mean, it was meant for him in the first place, so if he can't use it, let *him* find a place for it. Hey, Robideau!"

Wilmer watched Chuck push up alongside the policeman, open the bag, let him peer into it, mouth flapping overtime providing an explanation. Robideau hesitantly accepted the bag from Chuck, and Chuck came back to Wilmer grinning and pushing back the peak of his cap with his two fingers split in a victory sign.

People had their backs to him. He honked, but they thought he was part of the celebration and didn't look at him. The convertible was blocked. Unger trying to inch the car forward but having to give up and sit there with a trapped and disgusted look on his face, people leaving fingerprints on his fenders and his hood. Robideau had no trouble sidling up to him.

"Howdy."

Unger glanced up, and seeing who it was almost bared his teeth.

"You aren't wearing your seat belt," Robideau said. "That's an infraction."

"Robideau. You." Glancing down at his lap. "I'm not going anywhere, am I? Got my vehicles back yet?"

"I'm working on it."

"Not busting your butt, though, are you?"

"Every man has his methods." Robideau stood at the side of the car. He'd known mean guys. This guy was mean. Look at him. Any meaner he'd keep his socks up by driving in nails. "Will you answer some questions?"

Unger was counting off items:

"You couldn't find my sister's husband—somebody did that for you. Didn't get after those guys tried to shake me down. Haven't brought back my rig. You don't do a hell of a lot, do you, so I guess you might as well stand there asking dumb questions."

"I was wondering," Robideau said, "about E. J.'s wedding ring. I can't figure out why E. J. was wearing it that day. Nobody remembers him ever wearing his wedding ring. Guys at the dealership say he hated jewelry. Wouldn't even wear the great big Rolex somebody gave him. What about you, Mr. Unger?"

Unger was looking wary now. Eyes peering out through little slits.

"What about me what?"

"Did you ever see him with his wedding band on?"

"Sure. Lots of times."

"Is that a fact? Now I really am puzzled. I asked the same

question of Mrs. Jentzen a minute ago on the phone, and she told me he didn't wear it. Said she couldn't explain the situation, the body being found with the ring like that."

Unger sat there. Staring. The last float had gone by. The crowd was starting to thin.

"You can see my problem, Mr. Unger. Here's a man didn't wear jewelry. He turns up dead wearing a wedding band no one but you can recall him ever wearing. And a big Rolex he kept on a shelf. Also—I forgot to mention this—wearing a silver pinky ring. I mean, the ring was pretty much destroyed, but we can tell it was a pinky ring because of its size. A little thing. But Mrs. Jentzen says E. J. didn't own any silver jewelry whatsoever."

"She said that?"

"Yes."

Unger worked his mouth a few times.

"So what're you getting at? Trying to say it wasn't E. J. in that wreck? Don't waste your time, Robideau. Dental records don't lie."

"Actually," Robideau said, "that isn't strictly true. We're really talking about dental plates, aren't we? Portable property. Plates can be moved around as easily as—well—jewelry."

Unger revved his engine.

"Interesting. But I got to get going. Time is money."

"So it is. But I've still got a few more questions." Robideau hefted a liquor store bag filled with papers. "This stuff. All kinds of papers with E. J.'s name scrawled all over them."

Unger looked at the clutter of papers Robideau held in his hand, and felt a hollowness welling up in him.

"Oh, jeez. Where'd you get that?"

"From your trash bin, out behind the dealership." Robideau waited. "I got an idea your fingerprints will be on every one."

"That don't prove nothing."

"It does if a few have nobody's fingerprints on them except yours. So you want to take a stab at maybe explaining them to me?"

"Ahhhh—" Unger closed his mouth, swallowed, opened his mouth again. He shrugged, then grinned stupidly. His hand came out from between the bucket seats, holding a blue-steel automatic. "Maybe," he said, "you oughtta get in the car with me, okay?"

They had reached the end of the route. The parade was breaking up. Pete was just idling the big truck along, looking for a suitable place to turn the rig around.

"Watch," E. J. said, pointing.

Pete had already seen it. A convertible gliding up to the next intersection from a side street. It didn't stop there like it was supposed to, but rocketed suddenly forward.

The next thing that happened, E. J. was scrambling headfirst into the cockpit, dragging, pushing, shoving Pete away from the controls. Some sort of a wild man. Rather than fight him for the wheel, Pete got out of the way. It was safer. Now here was E. J. driving the rig.

"What the hell you doing?" Pete asked.

A blood lust had come into E. J.'s eyes. He stomped the accelerator. "I'm gonna get that guy," he said. "Didn't you see? It's Unger driving that car."

Pete stared after the retreating taillights. "I didn't notice, but it did look to me like Chief Robideau riding in the passenger's seat. The two of 'em together. How d'you figure that?"

"I don't," E. J. said, "I just know I'm not letting that son-of-a-gun out of my sight. Not after what you just told me about Duffy. He's a killer."

The White roared. The convertible, which had a long lead, began to be overhauled.

"Take it easy." Pete was holding on tight to the dash.

"This ain't no Daytona hot rod, you know."

"You'd be surprised," E. J. said.

"There's my truck, right behind us!" Unger hollered. He was staring wildly at the rear view mirror. "Who's driving it? What's it doing there?"

"I think you should let me out," Robideau said.

"Or else what?"

Robideau shrugged. "I dunno." Thinking about Unger the neat-freak. "How about or else I take your car apart?"

Robideau reached up and wrapped his hand around the mirror.

"What are you doing?" Unger screamed.

Robideau snapped the mirror off and tossed it out of the car. "They don't hardly make 'em like they used to," he said.

"Are you crazy?" Unger yelled.

"Still crazy after all these years." Robideau broke the sun visors off, first the one on his side of the car, then the one in front of Unger, and threw them out as well. "Piece of junk, this thing."

"Stop that!" Unger was driving with his right hand, keeping the gun in his left held flat across his stomach and pointed at Robideau.

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Robideau began popping the

heater controls off. Tossed them away. He jammed his fingernails in behind the AM/FM radio and popped it right out of the dash. He ripped the wires out and threw the thing over the side.

Unger was really screaming now. *"Do you know what that costs?"*

"No, but I bet it's overpriced," Robideau said.

"I'll shoot you, goddamn it!"

"No, you won't. You're curious, too. Wondering how well these babies are put together. Look."

Robideau grabbed the gear lever, tried for neutral but only managed to pop the car into drive-2. He bent the lever back and forth a couple of times, it snapped off, and he threw it out of the car.

They were off the main road now, bouncing along a narrow, rutted track, cornstalks flying by on both sides. Maybe Unger hoped the White wouldn't follow. He was wrong. The truck was hurtling after them, widening the track by flattening corn on either side. It was gaining fast.

The convertible was losing speed, bouncing up and down. Robideau saw a barn ahead of them—straight ahead, at the end of the track.

"How could you do that, anyway?" he asked. "Kill an inno-

cent old man like that, pour gas on him, burn the poor guy up?"

Unger's eyes flashed. "He was a *bum!* Just a *bum!* I made him useful for a change! No one cared about him!"

"I think you're wrong," Robideau said. He pointed. "See that barn? I think you're gonna hit it. Maybe you should do up your seat belt."

Robideau shoved his door open and rolled out.

The convertible had slowed to make the corner into the field, leaning hard over on its springs, its rear end slewing and fishtailing wildly. E. J. went right after it. They saw the door fly open and Chief Robideau tumble into the corn. The brake lights flashing now, the car losing speed fast. Unger trying to stop before he reached the closed doors of the barn.

"Hah," E. J. cackled. "We got the bugger now." He stomped down harder on the gas. "Ready to join the chief? Get set—jump!"

They bailed out.

Pete was sure he was going to die. Hit the ground wrong and break his scrawny old neck or something. But the corn broke his fall very nicely. He performed two, three somersaults, stalks snapping under him, and broke out of the corn just where the field met the

edge of the barnyard. Wound up spraddle-legged with a ring-side view of the crash.

The red convertible had just about stopped, would have maybe bunched its grille up a little on the big barn doors. And then the White ran up its rear end. The convertible leaped forward, drove though the doors with the White glued on its tail. The White going in after it like a big beast after a small one, burying itself. Terrible splintering and wrenching sounds cutting the air. Then the vehicles must have punched out the main support because the whole damn barn collapsed.

Then silence.

There was the barn, a mountain of smashed lumber with the tail of the flatbed sticking out of it. Flames licking up. Lots of black smoke.

Pete felt somebody at his elbow. Turned and found E. J. staring at the wreckage with him. E. J. said:

"D'you figure he's . . ."

"Dead, all right," Pete said. "You know," he asked, wafting smoke out of his eyes with his hand, "what that rig was worth?"

"Yes, I do," E. J. said. "It was worth every penny."

They stood up and watched as the fire took hold now, the smoke a black funnel rising up

into the sky. There'd be fire-trucks screaming up soon.

"We could both wind up in trouble."

"We could," E. J. agreed.

They thought awhile.

"Mind you," Pete said, "sucker did have faulty brakes, didn't it?"

E. J. looked at him.

"I noticed it soon as I got behind the wheel," Pete told him. "Mushy pedal. Didn't get a chance to mention it, though. All the excitement."

"Ah," E. J. said. Beginning to nod briskly now, seeing how it was. "Faulty brakes. That's right."

He was still nodding a moment later when Robideau came up to them, hobbling a little, but pulling a pen and a little black spiral notebook out of his coat.

“All right,” she said, “I’m listening.” Unplugging the kettle so that the piercing whistle stopped.

“I’m beginning to understand the guy,” Robideau said.

“What? Understand a murderer?”

“No. I mean understand old E. J. Him wanting to slip away.”

“I can certainly understand it after meeting that wife of his.

The witch. Hope you got her splang in jail."

Robideau nodded. "Until the bail hearing, she'll stay behind bars. Hopefully after, too."

"Steel bars, I hope. She'd bite through ordinary iron." Mrs. Robideau shuddered. "Brrrr! Some people."

"E. J.'d had enough. Wanted to slip away. And he mentioned it to his brother-in-law, who thought it over and saw how he could work it for himself and then went back to him later and said he had a brilliant plot figured out."

"A murder plot."

"Listen. E. J. would drive to the city one day, to take care of some business. Something he did all the time. Only this time he wouldn't be coming back. Unger assured E. J. he'd see that the dealership did okay, said he'd be happy to come up and manage it for him."

"E. J. should've seen the light go on right there."

"Should have, but didn't. He didn't know the two of them had done a bunch of talking on their own. That they'd decided this was an opportunity to get rid of him for good. He was leaving on his own accord, sure. But what then? They wanted to fix it so he wouldn't come popping out of the woodwork one day and reclaim his business and his bank account."

"So why didn't they take and try to kill him right away?"

"They meant to. Only he'd already disappeared. Took off so quick he surprised even them. Which presented a problem. It could be years before the law would recognize him as being legally dead and Mrs. Jentzen come into his estate. Unger started practicing up on E. J.'s signature. It was a half-assed solution. So when he ran into poor Duffy down at the Legion and saw the resemblance between him and E. J., he hit on a way that he could really speed things up."

"Kill Duffy. Plant some of E. J.'s belongings on him . . ."

"Kindly donated by E. J.'s wife. The only problem, the jewelry she had was all stuff he never wore. And so were the teeth. They had to take a chance on that."

That had probably been the clincher, Robideau thought, Unger finding out Duffy had no teeth. The polka band squeaking away in the background, Unger yelling, *You mean to say you got no teeth in your head at all? I'll be damned. Old E. J. never had none, either.* What had he done—got him completely smashed?

Lured Duffy out to the car somehow. Stopped by E. J.'s to pick up the personal items.

And there in the car, on a

dark road, stuffing E. J.'s new set of dentures into Duffy's mouth and slipping E. J.'s jewelry onto Duffy's hands. Robideau remembered the right-hand ring. Unger must have tugged like hell trying to get Duffy's silver pinky ring off. Then setting fire to the car. The S.O.B.

The lab said there were no traces of carbon in the one lung that was left, so at least Duffy hadn't been burned to death. Unger must have killed him first.

"It could have worked," the chief said.

"But you saw through it, dear."

"No, you did." Robideau looked at the stove. "Any more food in that pan?"

"What about your stomach?"

"What about it?"

Eat a cherry Popsicle and suck on a beer. Nobody but Wilmer Gates would do that. Pete watched him say to E. J., taking the Popsicle out of his mouth:

"So Unger said he'd help you. And Mrs. J. was in on it. But what if someday you suddenly reappeared? Come to life—like you actually did, in fact?"

"That wasn't supposed to happen," E. J. said. "See, the deal was, Unger would fly out to Detroit every six months

—say it was business—and bring me part of the cash receipts for that period. I had to live on something, and a special account at the bank was too easy to trace. I realize now he meant to bring me something else. Something that comes out the end of a gun fast and don't stop." E. J. looked miserable. "I sure am sorry about old Duffy."

Wilmer was chewing his Popsicle stick to splinters, his face in deep creases, following all this. He said:

"So am I. He'd of liked that parade. All the cotton candy and ice cream. Don't need teeth for that. He could of gummed the stuff up."

"Listen, I feel I owe you boys," E. J. said. "The whole town does. Tell you what. You want to come down to the dealership tomorrow, I'll fix each one of you up with a job."

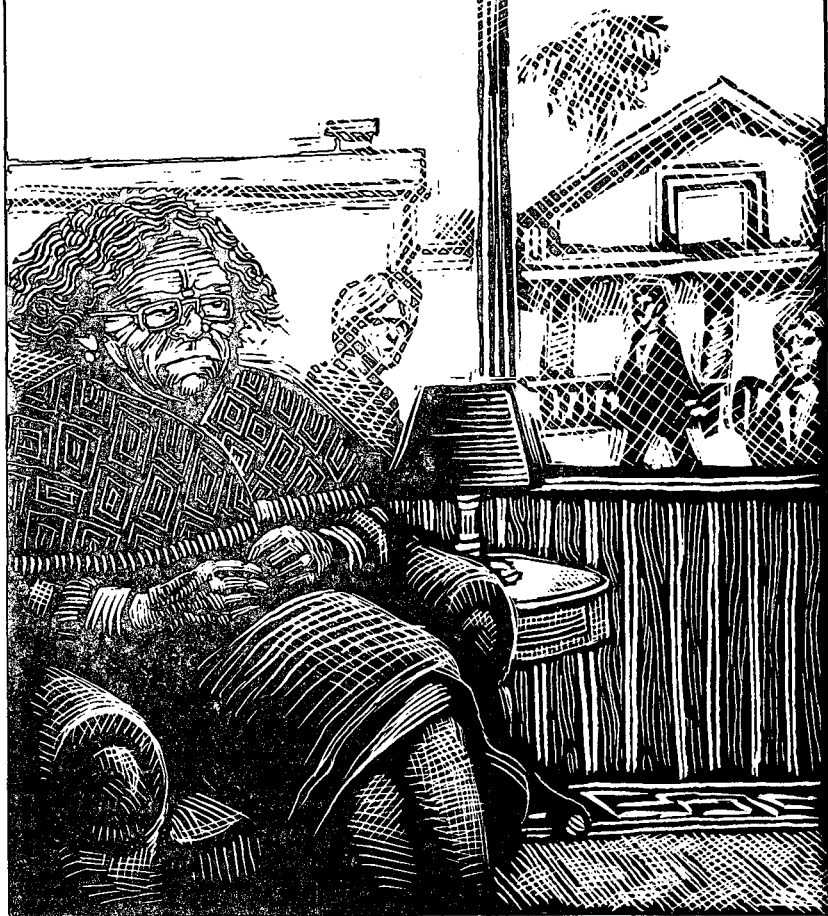
Wilmer Gates started hacking like maybe he'd got a wood splinter stuck in his throat. Chuck Lang nearly dropped his beer glass. Pete began to see bits of his life pass before his eyes, but he reached over quickly and gripped E. J.'s arms.

"Oh, hey. You don't owe us jobs. You don't hafta think twice about that."

"Hell, not even once," Wilmer and Chuck said.

The Neighbors

by Karen Skowron



She was put in the verandah room earlier now that Rebecca could not manage her alone. Colin was needed to help move her large dead-weight body from the bed in her room beside the kitchen to her chair on the enclosed porch.

When she was still mobile, she'd taken meals with the family, but after her last stroke more than a year ago, she chose to eat from a tray. And to spend her day at the corner of what had originally been a wraparound portico. She'd had Colin have it made into a room especially suited to her. He did not refuse. It was her money, after all—she had lots, and he had hopes of getting most, and besides, he was a good grandson. He thought he knew the benefits of a symbiotic relationship.

The verandah room was west facing: she preferred afternoon sun. It was well furnished with choice pieces from her old home—she particularly prized the grey-green rug her late husband had bought from a boy who had hitchhiked through the Mideast; she wondered if anyone realized the worth of the rug; she also spent pleasant moments imagining what the boy had done to acquire it.

But it was the advantageous aspects of this year-round verandah that held the greatest appeal. She could see everywhere and everything and everyone on the block. At least that was how she felt. And there were those who felt she was right.

There was a moth butting against the far left screen—in the warm weather, which lasted a goodly long time (she was glad the relatives with whom she must live after she no longer wanted to live on her own were in a nice climate; the country had such a variety), the glass windows were popped out so that only screens remained. Rebecca complained this morning that they'd be late for work taking all the windows out—she'd wanted to leave them out overnight, but Maude had been afraid it might rain, and she would not risk the rug, so she'd insisted the windows be replaced.

She leaned forward and studied the moth. Beautiful, fragile creature. She'd have Debbie release it when she came out.

Maude moved what she could of her body a few inches to the left in her specially made chair. Then a few inches back. It was good exercise. She could no longer walk, but she could keep her circulation active. She raised her white bolster-pillow arms, held them suspended for a moment, let them drop. Did it again. Then she started on her hands, slowly rolling open and shut caterpillar fingers. They really did seem less stiff. Maybe that Royal Jelly she'd read about in a magazine and which she'd gotten Debbie to send

for was helping. She regarded her fingers with interest and slight distaste. A shame she had to give up her rings when her hands started to swell. But the medicine that bloated her did wonders for her breathing. At eighty-five one had to make concessions in life. It was a new experience. It was not that she was calmly accepting. But she was reasonable.

A door down the block opened and closed. Maude did not have to look to know it was Ferdy Morris walking down the drive to his car—seven forty-five exactly was Ferdy's leavetaking time. And today being Tuesday, she ignored him. She knew he'd glance toward her—he couldn't seem to help himself—and she had remarkable peripheral vision in spite of the age of her eyes. She'd had this neighborhood in full vision for years.

If it were tomorrow, Wednesday, she'd make a point of leaning forward and staring at him. She might or might not quirk a smile. She might or might not offer a response to his half wave. It depended on how she felt. She had no idea what he did on Wednesdays that made him feel guilty. But there was something. She'd noticed way back—oh, last September—that he was, well, skulky on Wednesdays. Walked nervously to his car. Adjusted his tie far beyond necessity. Seemed always now to get his haircuts on a Tuesday.

So she'd started playing on his discomfort, make him aware she was watching with a peculiar intensity.

And a few months ago a perfect opportunity to focus on the torment presented itself—she still chuckled at it. Ferdy's son had been playing in front of her house by the curb, twirling a striped disk on a stick. Ferdy had been standing by the end of his car (a flamboyant red sporting type; every time she saw it, she sniffed) talking to a neighbor, all relaxed and smiling, his tanned body (lots of tennis; she sniffed again) at ease.

This changed immediately when she answered Ferdy's son—calling out to a friend across the street, "I'll get my dad to drive us"—with "Don't ask him to do it on a *Wednesday*." She'd used her singsong voice, ending on a high note and making the day of the week into three long syllables.

Ferdy's son had looked toward her and then mouthed something under his breath. But Ferdy had given a length-of-body shudder and was no longer relaxed. Since then the walk to his car every morning under her gaze (or nongaze) was agony. Particularly on Wednesdays.

He drove off now slowly, overemphasizing the fact that he *wasn't* bothered by her and he *wasn't* about to speed away. As he did regularly.

Maude loved her room. She loved her view. She could see the intersection and the minimall and the liquor store just beyond the mall. She could keep track of who on her block went there and how often. George Phoebe was going *less* often, and she wondered why. And old Mrs. Simms (Maude sniffed—Anabel Simms was fifteen years younger than she was, and already people called her old) went clear around the block now so she wouldn't have to pass Maude on her way to buy booze.

Maude knew this because Debbie had seen Mrs. Simms in the liquor store at a time when Maude had not seen her pass by. Debbie was getting Maude the special brandy that helped settle her stomach. So Maude knew Anabel went around the block. Just because Maude had taken to creaking her chair each and every time Anabel walked by. Sort of punctuating Anabel's passing was how Maude thought of it. And chuckled.

She creaked her chair now, just for the joy of it. The chair was big and solid. Like she was. She loved the feel of the wood, the way the back fit her body. And when it developed a creak, she wouldn't let it be fixed. She liked it.

"Ah, Debbie," she said as her great-granddaughter came through the door. Maude glanced at Debbie's ears as she bent to offer her cheek for a good morning kiss. Yes, there was that red bruised look around the opening that meant Debbie had used earplugs—nasty, plastic orbs, Maude thought—to try to get more sleep after awakening at the household's usual extra-early hour so Maude could be settled into her chair, the furniture rearranged to her liking—her tea stand, movable desk, knitting cabinet (she never knitted; it held photographs she might like to look at again and a collection of worry bead strands to exercise her fingers). Today she'd asked Rebecca to find her cloisonné brooch which she had a fancy to wear—it was in the jewelry box in the vanity case at the back of her closet, but she didn't know that; no wonder it took so long to find. Then her shoes had to be retied. Maude could see they were too tight. Rebecca always did them too tight when she was in a hurry.

If Rebecca stayed home where she belonged, she wouldn't have to rush so much, Maude thought—she'd told her grandson's wife this often enough, but it made no difference. When Maude came

to live with Colin and his family eleven years ago, Rebecca had almost immediately gone out and got a job. She managed a bowling alley, of all things. Maude sniffed.

Maude wondered where on earth Debbie had been last night. She still wasn't in when Maude fell asleep. Served her right if she was tired this morning. And if she had sore ears. Debbie didn't usually go out—not since the unfortunate incident with that divinity student a few years back. Maude snorted—a sniff was far too mild. He'd been such a know-it-all. Maude had stuck a thorn or two in his theology. And he'd not spoken to her after she had him all to herself once and described certain of Debbie's coming of age practices as an adolescent. (Maude admitted to herself that she did embellish these a bit. But with good cause!) This minister-to-be soon stopped talking to Debbie as well.

No—Debbie didn't usually go out at night. She and Maude were in the habit of watching TV together (Maude's bedroom felt like a private theater with that giant screen), and both dozed off early.

"There's a moth in here," she told her great-granddaughter. "Please rescue it carefully." Debbie looked duszier than usual. ("Late nights!" Maude thought.) On some women the unusual color would have been tawny, attractive. Debbie's skin had a tone that made her look dirty.

"I will, Gee Gee, I always do." Debbie's voice was soft and lovely and kind. Maude wished she knew whether it was *sincere*.

Debbie got a glass from the kitchen and a cardboard flyer from the mail pile in the hall. She gently trapped the moth against the screen under the glass and slowly eased the stiff paper along, letting the moth step onto the board so its legs wouldn't be crushed.

"Put it in the lilacs," Maude told her. "There it will have the best chance of recovering. High up as you can."

"All right."

Debbie carried it along the hall, across the kitchen, and out the back door. She waited as long as it might have taken her to walk into the yard to the lilac grove. Her great-grandmother might be able to see the entire block, but she could not see into the back garden. Debbie took the paper from the top of the glass and flicked the moth away from her. She watched it fall into a window well. It did not fly out. Debbie put the glass in the dishwasher, the flyer in the garbage.

"Did you put it high in the lilacs?" Maude asked.

"Yes, very high. It's safe."

"Good."

"Can I get you anything, Gee Gee?" she asked in her exquisite voice. When she was a child and was taken to visit Maude, she could not manage such a grand long title as great-grandmother. So she'd somehow shortened it to Gee Gee. Maude rather hated it. G. G. would have been more acceptable, but Rebecca had addressed Debbie's cards to Maude, and she wrote to Gee Gee. It was like calling a horse. But Maude had never expressed her displeasure. That would give people something with which to annoy her. And that would never do.

"No, I'm fine, thank you," she said, but then as Debbie was leaving the room she asked, "Is there any of that lemon tea left from yesterday?"

"I'll make you some more," Debbie said with the jewel of a voice that was so at odds with her sullen face.

Oh—oh—there came Mrs. Nesbitt out of her house. She too glanced over at Maude's screened room, a drawn look on her face.

Maude chortled. Debbie looked at her and saw Mrs. Nesbitt, but she did not wait for her great-grandmother to explain. She could imagine the reason for the glance and the laugh.

Maude thought of the look on Mrs. Nesbitt's son's face when he came to collect for the newspaper the night before. As he was leaving, Maude had hissed him back to stand outside her window. "Ask your mother when she plans to have her portrait painted," she said. That was all. He'd shrugged and gone home puzzled. But obviously he'd asked her. Maude always knew when her little barbs hit home. Well, Mrs. Nesbitt had had that young man from the framing store to her house three times in two weeks. Well, well.

"Debbie!" she suddenly called. Maude mumbled something so that Debbie was forced to come out of the kitchen and down the hall.

"Are you still sulking over not going away this summer?"

It had suddenly occurred to Maude that Debbie looked *less* sullen than usual, and she wondered why, especially since it was only two days ago that Maude had finally refused to pay for some sort of fool course for the girl. A *massage* course, even though Debbie called it kinestheseology or something like that. Went on and on about electrical charges in the body or some such thing. Kinky-ology! Trust Debbie to want something like that. She'd always had a strange streak. She'd been far too good in science all through

school. Physics and chemistry. Always tinkering with smelly chemicals in the basement. Or zapping electricity around. She'd knocked herself out once somehow, fooling around. "Blow us all up one day," Rebecca used to complain, but in a way she seemed proud of her daughter and it sounded almost like a compliment.

Debbie might have won a scholarship and gone away somewhere to college, but she was terrible in all her other subjects.

Well, she didn't have to worry about doing anything to earn a living. Colin didn't mind supporting her now—Maude suspected it was because Debbie took care of Maude during the day, got up with her at night if need be; a companion would have cost the earth and disrupted the household. And besides, Maude wouldn't even consider it. She wanted Debbie.

In any case, Maude had left all her money to her great-granddaughter. Debbie didn't know this. No one did except the lawyer. Maude's one regret in life was she would not see Rebecca's face when the will was read. Or Colin's.

"No, Gee Gee. I'm not sulking," Debbie told her. And went back to making the tea.

Hmmm, thought Maude. Why wasn't she? Oh well, she'd ferret it out eventually.

A car stopped in front of the house on the corner across from the minimall. Maude creaked forward in her chair. Nothing of interest, just that crazy girl still pining over the Leadletter boy. It had been going on for months. Once a day at least, sometimes twice, the girl would stop in her car and stare at the house. Just for a few minutes. Then drive away. It was as if she were feeding on something.

The Leadletter boy was gone because of Maude. She couldn't stand to see anything or anyone trapped. Debbie would be free once Maude died, and on all that money, oh how she would be free! Maude knew she wouldn't last forever. It could be any time—five, ten, fifteen years at the most. She had a very healthy heart. She might well reach the century mark. Her own mother had lived to be seventy-two when all her friends had dropped off in their fifties and sixties. As for Maude's daughter, her closest kin—well, Effie was alive well into her sixties if you could call that twilight state in the nursing home alive. But she'd always taken after her father. He had weak genes. Maude had married him for more tangible reasons. Debbie was only twenty-two but the healthiest creature. She'd have plenty of time to enjoy her freedom. So let her work for it now.

Maude was about to call out and ask why the tea was so long in coming, but she was distracted by the Leadletter boy's old girlfriend driving away. She looked as if she was crying. Maude snorted.

She'd freed the Leadletter boy. From that hussy as well. Everyone in the neighborhood knew his situation: Youngest son stuck at home with his dad (mother gone off on her own with all the security), working in the local meat market as a sort of apprentice butcher, henpecked by that brassy girl in her own Pinto trying to live up to her Owen Heights standards, wishing he could go to Hollywood and become a movie star.

He was goodlooking. Maude had caused some color to show in Debbie's sallow cheeks by wondering aloud what he and that girl did in the back seat of the Pinto. But Maude wasn't about to support his Tinsel Town craving.

When his brother offered him a job in Alaska (Maude heard this all from Colin, who played cards with the Leadletter boy's father), she took the risk of his doing something else with the money.

She'd called him over to the house when the windows were open but the screens not yet in—that joyous time after the cool season but before the bugs; he'd been walking past—and she quietly said, "I think you should go to Alaska." Her voice just then, had she known it, sounded as lovely as Debbie's.

He was taken aback. He'd heard about this tartar—Colin got quite verbal after a few games of cards, a few drinks. But she sounded so nice.

"Well, I'd like to," he said. He forgot to tuck in his chin when he talked because he'd been told this presented his best active profile. "But I can't."

"More than the ticket?" she asked.

And he looked into those flat grey eyes stuck on her flat round face like some cartoonist's rendering and found kindness there. He forgot to gut-breathe as he spoke.

"Debts," he said briefly.

"How much?"

"Seven hundred."

She'd reached into the old reticule that hung on one leg of the table and pulled out her checkbook without taking her eyes from him. She wrote him a check for three thousand dollars.

"It's Edward, isn't it?" she asked as she wrote.

"Ted."

"Oh, well. Ted. Lead. I prefer Edward." She wrote Edward. Put Ted in brackets. She wanted no call from the bank.

She held the check out the window. He took it. Looked at it. Looked at her.

Something like sixty years separated their ages, but for one moment they were united in a timeless endeavor. She felt afterward that she got far more than she paid for, in the sensation it gave her.

He pushed the check into his jeans pocket and walked slowly away from her.

At the sidewalk he looked back once and waved the fingers of one hand, a final salute.

He continued on slowly to his house. Then he leaped the porch steps and disappeared inside. He was gone the next day.

"Debbie," she suddenly shouted and nearly got the tray dumped on her. Debbie had already come into the room.

"You startled me," Debbie said. "I nearly dropped the tea. And this. It was on the porch."

There was an eight-inch-square box wrapped in white paper on the tray. It had clear black printing on it. MAUDE WENTWORTH. Block letters. A child might have written it, but the edges were sharp, not crayony. Butcher's twine quarter-sected it on all sides.

Maude looked at Debbie. Her mouth was suddenly dry. She licked her spacious lips. If she'd been a fat woman—she was merely big—her eyes would have sunk into mounds of pig flesh and glittered. Instead, they gave an expectant, devilish gleam.

"A gift from the neighbors?" she inquired softly and then laughed.

"Who else?" Debbie asked, staring at the box. "It's ticking."

"Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho," Maude breathed. This was good. Very good. Even better than the obscene phone calls and the hate letters (there had been several over the years) and the piles of stuff flung onto her yard or onto her doorstep. People's retaliation took fascinating forms.

"Where did you find it?" she asked.

"On the front porch. Just by the door."

"It must have been left this morning—there's no dampness on it. After Colin and Rebecca left, or they would have seen it. Not long ago. Hmm. That leaves a lot of possibilities. And whoever left it must have come up the other side of the house or else I'd have seen. Oh-ho-ho-ho."

She considered savoring the parcel while she drank her tea. But she could not wait. Old age had made her greedy. Debbie too was devouring it with her eyes. She'd been an equally eager recipient of all the neighbors had to offer. Maude lifted it carefully off the tray that Debbie had put on the tea table, and put it in her lap.

"My scissors," she said and held her palm out like a surgeon. Debbie selected embroidery scissors with crane beak blades and wing handles. She slapped them onto her great-grandmother's hand. Maude could always count on Debbie to take up a part. Debbie's breathing had become audible, and Maude wanted to tell her to close her mouth, but it would break the spell. She was caught up in it, riding on some magnificent wave.

She cut the twine, loosened it, drew it away, and dropped it on the floor. Debbie did not pick up the dropped object as she normally would. Maude handed the scissors back to Debbie, then picked up the box and held it to her better right ear. Yes, she could certainly hear the ticking.

"Well. Well. Well," she said, putting it back on her lap. "You know what they're hoping. That I'll drop dead of a heart attack about now."

She turned her head from right to left and back again, letting her eyes travel up and down the block, across the houses of her neighbors.

Then she turned the box carefully over and began to pull off the tape. There was only one piece, right in the middle. "Neat wrapper," she murmured. She undid the white paper. A heavy cardboard box like the ones china stores send cups and saucers home in now lay in her lap.

"If it's a clock—it may *not* be, of course—" she paused to fully enjoy the thrill that ricocheted up her increasingly unfeeling body, "but if it *is* a clock, I'll put it right here on the windowsill where everyone can see it and enjoy the joke hugely."

Debbie was still staring at the box. She was silent now. It was as if she had stopped breathing.

Maude curved her sausage-white fingers under the lid and lifted it.

When the explosion occurred, only one of the women was surprised.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Photo by Elliott Erwitt/Magnum

Blending in. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035. Please label your entry "October Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

FICTION

Mixed Agenda



by
William J. Carroll, Jr.

Illustration by Jon Weiman

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If trouble had a look, the young marine in the hall outside the courtroom was wearing it. He also seemed willing to show it to anyone who came within range. At least he showed it to me as I sat down across from him and the two bored looking SP's who flanked him on the bench—and I didn't know him from Adam.

I don't know what my own face showed, but after a moment the boy lost interest in me and turned his facial violence down on his shackled wrists, and then I lost interest in him.

I got out my dogeared copy of *Sentimental Education* and tried to pick up the thread of the story, and for about twenty minutes or so I went through the motions, reading the words and turning pages, but I didn't have much luck, so I finally put the book aside and tried to nap.

But that didn't work, either.

In fact, the only thing my head was up to just then was going over and over and over again the testimony I'd just given in the military court, and the verbal violence Carlson's defense attorney had handed out to me while I did so.

And the more I thought about it, the more worked up I got.

The thing was, it hadn't been expected. Not by the officer from the Judge Advocate Gen-

eral's office prosecuting the case and not by me—and it hadn't been fun.

Until late yesterday it had been assumed that Carlson would plead guilty and my written deposition would suffice. I'd even booked myself on a flight out of San Diego for Tacoma last night. But at the last minute, Carlson demanded new counsel, which was his right, and because the JAG office here was as short-staffed as anywhere else, they brought in one of those purchase-order lawyers the military resorts to in the absence of RA legal officers—a slyly clever civilian attorney named Shapiro—who'd pled Carlson innocent. The court-martial would now be running its normal course—with upstanding citizens like myself getting badgered and harassed as they tried to tell the simple truth—and I couldn't see it making any difference in the end.

Not unless upstanding citizens like myself lost it on the stand.

As I'd just been about to.

Which left me out in the hall where I couldn't read and I couldn't nap and I couldn't even leave the building while the court-martial was still in session, and I wasn't very happy at all that.

I suppose my face got some

angry in it, too, because the young manacled marine in front of me was suddenly scowling fiercely at me again.

So, being the kind of adult I was, I scowled right back.

Actually, underneath the anger that arranged his face, he wasn't a bad-looking kid. Dark-haired and dark-skinned, he had good straight shoulders and was taller than either of his guards, who both looked half asleep just then. I put his age at not much more than twenty and his boiling point only a few degrees above that.

Behind his eyes was a reservoir of grief and resentment that seemed flammable, and though I'd never seen him before in my life, he looked just right the way he was—handcuffed and under guard.

I was glad he wasn't my problem.

After we'd kept up our dueling frowns for a moment, I got sick of myself, stood up, and walked to the end of the hall, feeling his anger on my back. I got a drink of water from the fountain there, lit a cigarette and studied the green wall in front of me, and tried to think happy thoughts.

But it was no go.

My head wouldn't let it rest.

I'd been on the stand for

nearly two hours, and I'd taken a lot of heat from Shapiro, who had that facile way of making outrageous statements into unanswerable questions, and he got me angry—angry and stupid—and I'd been really close to blowing up at him.

Because there had been not a damn thing wrong with the arrest we'd made of Carlson.

It had been strictly by-the-numbers—embarrassingly by-the-numbers—but Shapiro kept talking about the “irregularity of my involvement,” the “bizarre attempt at entrapment,” the “questionable evidence,” and “lack of probable cause,” and he'd been relentlessly sarcastic at every feeble attempt I made to respond, which left me redfaced and blustering and it'd been getting worse with every minute.

Luckily, the court had a full schedule that morning, and the officer of the court wanted to review some prior evidence, so he terminated Shapiro's grilling of me, then told me to hold myself available for further questions.

So there I was, in the hall, smoking, watching the green pigment on the wall age, trying to think happy thoughts with no luck at all—and it was just about then that all the commotion started.

I heard a shout and the sounds of scuffling, and when I

looked, I saw the young marine and both guards standing and struggling.

The SP's were holding him, but the boy swung his locked wrists at the head of one and put a solid kick into the knee of the other, which sent them both into heaps on the floor, and then he charged up the hallway toward me.

At least, that's what seemed to be happening.

The thing is, a part of me knew this didn't make any sense.

I didn't know this kid. I'd never seen him before. He had nothing to do with the Carlson trial, and we'd only exchanged a few seconds' worth of ugly faces, so why would he be attacking me?

It made no sense.

But there was another part of me that was, I suppose, looking for a fight. A part of me that wanted to rid itself of some of the excess of anger I'd been brewing up, and didn't care who got in the way, and it didn't have to make sense.

So I set myself to meet his charge, put my weight on my toes, raised my hands, turned sideways . . .

And out of the corner of my eye, I caught the image of another man in the hall.

Slightly behind and to my left, and as the boy got close to

me, I saw his eyes fixed on that other man.

In that fraction of a second I knew the boy was after *him*.

Not that it made a lot of difference, however, because that was an intellectual judgment and I'd already been committed by an emotional one, and reflex was in command. So, even as the kid started to rush by me, I reached out and grabbed his arm and leveraged his body in a semicircle that sent him crashing into the wall by the fountain.

He didn't fall to the floor, though, and he wasn't done.

He turned fast and lunged straight at me, his eyes blazing with anger at my interference, and he was just too quick and strong to avoid.

He bull-rushed me into the wall where I smacked the back of my head hard enough to bring stars swimming into view.

I felt his hands at my throat and I lifted a knee into his groin, which backed him off slightly, but this kid was very strong and very angry—and the part of me that got me into this mess was getting worried.

But it wasn't the point of his rage.

Abruptly, he pulled away from me and started again toward the other man—whom I saw clearly then for the first

time. He was a uniformed naval officer, holding a metal crutch in both hands like a baseball bat. And there was something vaguely familiar about him.

As the boy charged, the officer swung the crutch, missing him by a mile, but in slowing down to avoid the blow, the young marine slipped slightly, and I was able to catch up and put a solid punch into his lower back.

He swung around on me again, but he was still off balance and I was able to duck under his shackled fists and then swing a heavy right hand—probably harder than I should have—that crunched into his face and sent him straight onto his back.

And that was that.

Panting and holding my stinging hand, I looked up at the officer, who was standing over the fallen man with the crutch still held at the ready. I think I was just on the verge of placing him when my brain finally reacted to the crack it had gotten from behind, and a black cloud blotted out the day.

I let the kid break my fall as I joined him on the floor.

I wasn't out long, but kind of in and out for about twenty minutes, the time it took for things to get sorted out

and for me, with a little help, to get to the base infirmary, which luckily was right next door.

They put me in a small cold treatment room, made me get undressed, and gave me an icepack for the back of my head. By the time the young doctor saw me, I was shivering.

He looked, poked, prodded, and listened, left me, for a while, then returned and said, "So—Warrant Officer Virgin-iak, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"What was the fight about?"

I wasn't sure, and I told him so.

He hmmmph'd, then began writing something on his clipboard. "I'm recommending that you sign into the base hospital for the night as a precaution."

"Recommending?"

"If I thought it was absolutely necessary, I'd order it, but we're short of bed space. On the other hand, you blacked out, and that means a concussion, which is serious."

I shivered. "So is frostbite," I told him, getting my feet on the floor.

He helped me to stand, but I was all right, and I started dressing.

"If you don't check in," he said, "take it easy for a couple of days, and if you experience any dizziness or blurred vision,

get treatment right away." He began writing again. "And," he added in a way that sounded hopeless, "you really should quit smoking, you know."

"I know," I told him in a more-than-hopeless-but-less-than-likely voice.

He tore off a piece of paper and handed it to me. "You can get this prescription filled at the pharmacy down the hall. It's for the headache."

"Thank you."

"Don't mix it with alcohol."

I told him I wouldn't, and he started to leave but then stopped and said, "You have a visitor outside."

I got my pants, shirt, and shoes on, thinking it would be Captain Blackmun, the JAG officer prosecuting in the Carlson case, come to tell me how badly I botched my testimony. But when my visitor came in the door, it was, of all people, Carlson's attorney.

"How's your head?" the lawyer asked me curiously.

"Still intact."

He smiled and put his fanny up on the table.

Shapiro was about my age, short, pudgy, with thinning curly hair and a pinched set of facial features. He looked something like an upright hamster wearing thick-lensed glasses and a three-piece suit.

He wasn't my favorite person

just then, and it showed on my face.

"I gave you a rough time in court this morning," he told me with a hint of apology. "I hope you don't hold it against me." He smiled, which took the hint of apology away. "Just doing my job."

I knotted my tie, pulled on my jacket, and looked at him.

He nodded. "Let me get to the point," he said. "I'm representing Corporal Montoya in his assault case."

"Who?"

"Leon Montoya," he told me, waving his hand for some reason at the doorway. "The marine you just had this little conflict with."

That figured.

Shapiro sighed. "The thing is," he said in a complaining way, "if you press charges, it could work against his interests."

I laughed at him. "Really," I said, then I thought about it and asked, "What assault case are we talking about, exactly?"

"Oh." He shook his head. "That's another matter entirely. In fact, that's what provoked him this morning. He has nothing against you."

"That's good to know."

The lawyer sighed. "He's very sorry about what happened. He wants to apologize." He stood up and waved a hand

again at the doorway. "He's just down the hall."

"Have him put it in writing."

He looked disappointed. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and shuffled around the room with his eyes on the floor. "Look, Mr. Virginiak," he began, then he grimaced and looked up at me. "Look," he started again in a man-to-man way, "you don't know me, and I don't know you, but between you and me, the kid needs a break."

"Does he?"

"Yes," he said seriously. "Leon Montoya's had a pretty rough week, Mr. Virginiak. His father was killed on Monday, and now he's facing a BCD for assaulting the man responsible. I almost had *him* willing to drop the charges, but what the kid pulled this morning put that idea out the window." He frowned sharply. "Grumman's going to go ahead full bore on him, and that means copping a plea, and that means a Bad Conduct at minimum. I'll be lucky to keep him out of jail—I don't think he deserves that."

"Did you say Grumman?"

He nodded. "Right."

"He was the officer in the hall?"

"That's right," he replied, his eyes screwing up at me in question. "Do you know him?" The name was as vaguely familiar

as the man's face, but I still couldn't place him, and I shook my head. "They were his dogs that got at Montoya's dad," Shapiro said.

I felt a bit lost. "His dogs?"

He nodded. "Last Sunday night, or early Monday morning, Montoya's father was apparently trespassing on Grumman's property. Grumman was away at the time, but he had these two pit bulls he let run loose in his back yard. The dogs got at Montoya Senior and tore him apart."

I remembered the haunted looked on the young marine's face, and wondering at what his inner eye was looking, and now I knew.

"They flew Leon in from Hawaii to do the identification on Wednesday," Shapiro went on, "and—it wasn't very pleasant. He went over the edge, found Grumman, and they had a scuffle. Grumman sustained some injuries and pressed charges."

"What was Montoya doing on Grumman's property?"

He now gave me a confused look for a second, then it cleared. "Oh. The father, you mean. Joe Montoya. Right." He shrugged. "Looks like he was trying to break into Grumman's house. Attempted burglary, the police said. I don't know. No one does."

"Was Joe Montoya stationed here, too?"

He frowned sharply at me. "Oh. No, no, no, no, no. He wasn't in the service or anything like that. He was a bum. A drunk. He lived in San Diego, address none. You know. Some kind of derelict."

"I see."

"The fact is, Leon hadn't seen him in a long time. Joe had walked out on the family years ago, and they'd had no real contact—except for a Christmas card just last year." He smiled some pathos at me. "The old man asked him for money. But Leon didn't want to have anything to do with him. Ashamed of him, that kind of thing. And if you want my expert psychiatric opinion, I'd say that's what Leon's really angry at, you know?"

"Then he should take it out on himself," I said foolishly.

Shapiro smiled because he was getting to know me pretty well. "He kept that Christmas card," he told me. "He carries it around with him."

I looked at the little man for a while, weighing the satisfaction I'd get in disappointing him at least once that day against adding a little more pain to the young marine's face.

"All right," I told him. "I won't press charges, but those

two SP's he knocked around may have something to say about what he did to them."

Shapiro smiled like a shark. "I can handle those guys," he told me. "It was *you* that had me worried."

Right.

I let him lead me out into the corridor where he followed me down to the pharmacy. I handed over my prescription at the counter and was told to stand by, and when I turned around, Shapiro was still there.

"Leon would like to apologize," the lawyer told me with an expectant look. "He's just down the hall."

On either side of the door to the room where Shapiro took me were the two now sheepish looking SP's, who stared straight ahead when I passed. Inside the room Lance Corporal Leon Montoya was sitting on a stool by the wall with his head leaning back against it.

In one hand he was gingerly holding a small icepack over the bridge of his nose; cotton swabs stuck out from his nostrils. In the other hand he was holding a dirty, crumpled Christmas card. As I walked over to him, I saw that his nose was leaning now rather sharply to the right. His shirt-front was dark-stained with blood, but when he saw me, he

smiled—and there was a gauze pack in the gap where one of his front teeth used to take up space. “Oh! Hi!” he said, getting up.

I waved him back down and hopped up onto the examining table. After he reseated himself, I asked him how he felt.

“‘Snuthin’,” he told me with a careless shrug. “You hit pretty good.”

Right, I thought, giving myself a mental kick in the butt. I tried to remind myself that the young man was responsible for the monster headache I was having, but the fact was he’d gotten the worst of the deal, and I regretted it.

“They’re gonna straighten it out in a minute,” he mumbled at me, meaning his nose.

“Good.”

“And they’re gonna try and stick the tooth back in.”

“It’s your lucky day.”

He smiled, shook his head, and said, “Look, sir, I’m really sorry for what I did to you.”

I laughed at him.

“I mean it,” he told me with dark seriousness. “I wasn’t tryin’ to hurt you.”

“I know. Mr. Shapiro told me.”

He nodded and frowned at the floor at his feet. “I was tryin’ to get him.” He looked up at me. “That Captain Grumman. You know what he did?”

I nodded.

“He killed my father,” Montoya said with quiet anger. “He put his *dogs* on him!” He made a snuffling sound. “That’s so . . .” He searched for the level of horror the idea held for him, but he couldn’t put a word to it, and his face crumpled into agony. “He had no call to do that,” he sobbed. “My father was no thief.”

“Well . . .”

“He *wasn’t*,” he blurted, as if I’d disagreed. “My father was a *good* man till he got sick.” He stared down at the wrinkled card in his hand and deep-breathed away the excess of emotion.

I watched him working the card over with his hand as if trying to feel something in its fibers.

“He was a carpenter,” he told me in a mumbled whisper, “and he worked hard all his life till he got arthritis. He got it so bad he couldn’t hold a hammer. He drank because it hurt.” He heaved a ragged sigh, and two tears sped down his cheeks. “He went away so Ma could get welfare.” He brushed at the tears on his face with an impatient gesture, then added, “But he still loved us. He always loved us.”

He wasn’t really talking to me then. He was indicting himself for his own doubts about

his father, but he was going to have to defend himself on whatever charges he brought so I said nothing.

Montoya stared at the card a moment more, then looked up at me. "He sent me this card last Christmas, but I didn't send him one."

He offered it to me, and because it would have been awkward not to, I took it.

It was cheap, dirty with fingerprints, and creased in several places. The printed words were generically trite, but the words written inside, with splotchy blue ballpoint in a tight, crabby hand, were not.

Dear Son,

I got your address from Uncle Luis, who didn't want to give me it but I made him so don't be angry with him.

How are you doing in the Marines in Hawaii! I am doing okay for now but I still got no job and I don't know what my plans are.

I know you still are angry at me for not coming to mama's funeral but I was too sick to come and ashamed too! But I love her even now, so you don't think I don't.

My best friend Indian Red is writing this for me (HI LEON) because my

hands are getting real bad. He is not a real indian or nothing but they call him that because he has red hair and sometimes does a war dance when he is feeling good. He is my best friend.

The social security check is too small to cover the rent at my place so I am moving out pretty soon. Indian Red and me are pretty down on our luck these days. If you got any extra cash can I borrow some? You can send it to Luis. He won't give me any more money himself and I can't blame him for that.

Well, Merry Christmas Leon. I still love you even if you don't love me.

The letter was signed by a different hand—a scrawled and shaky line of marks that formed nothing comprehensible.

I gave the card back to him, and he went back to looking at it. "He couldn't read or write," he told me quietly again. "But..." He let the thought trail away wordlessly.

"Well," I said finally, standing again. "I'm sorry about your father, Leon."

He nodded.

"But it seems to me," I added,

"that you're going to have to find some way to live with it, or you'll just end up running yourself into the ground."

He said nothing, and kept looking at the card.

And for the second time that day I was glad he wasn't my problem.

Shapiro was waiting for me in the hall, and he followed me again to the pharmacy. "Pretty pathetic, isn't it."

"He's a big boy."

I got my prescription, a bottle of big white tablets, then I looked back at the lawyer and said, "What about Carlson?"

"Court's done until Monday morning at ten." He gave me a questioning look. "I may be putting you on the stand."

"Carlson is scum."

"Sure he is. What do you want me to do about it?"

"There was nothing wrong with the sting we pulled to get him."

"Maybe not," he said reasonably, "but you didn't seem so very sure of yourself earlier."

I took a deep breath to calm myself, and the back of my head said hello again. "And that's what it's all about," I said, "isn't it? Making us seem unsure of ourselves when you damn well know there was nothing wrong with what we did."

"The creation of doubt is my business," he told me flatly.

I started to tell him what I thought his business was, but I let it go.

The prescription called for two of the tablets every four hours, so I popped two out of the bottle and washed them down at a fountain by the door.

When I'd done that, I said to Shapiro, who was still staying close to me, "I'll be ready for you Monday."

His eyes hooded slightly. "I'm sure you will."

I nodded and started away.

"You know Captain Grumman, don't you?" he said, as if accusing me of something.

I looked back. "He seemed familiar."

He got a clever look in his face.

"I mean, if you were a friend of Grumman's, you might think about talking with him. About maybe dropping *his* charges against Leon."

I laughed at his gall, and felt my head pound disapproval.

He smiled back and flashed me a peace sign. "Just asking," he said. "And thanks. The kid needed a break."

I watched him waddle back down to the treatment room; then I put my hat on—carefully—and walked out into the sunshine.

And, because I didn't work

for Shapiro, I walked over to the courthouse again and looked up Blackmun, and we spent a couple of hours in his airless, cubbyhole office going over my testimony—what I should have said and how I should have said it and how I'd damn well better be perfect on Monday or Carlson might walk with a slap on the wrist. I wanted to reassure him that I'd be ready for Shapiro the next time, but the damn pills, which hadn't done a thing for my headache, were leaving me woozy and a little sick at my stomach, so I had to cut things short. When I finally left, he didn't seem too impressed with me.

But he would be on Monday.

Just then I wanted my bunk.

But outside, walking around, I got my legs back under me, and then, outside the 32nd Street Naval Base, in my rental and driving along Market to Harbor Drive, I felt all right.

My head had stopped aching, and the sun felt good, and I realized that I now had a free weekend ahead of me in San Diego, actually, one of my favorite places.

Which wasn't exactly fair to the rest of the people in my already short-staffed office up at Fort Lewis, but that wasn't my fault.

In fact, the fault, if it was anyone's, belonged to Chavez.

It was Chavez—Raymond, Colonel, USA, CIC, my boss—after all, who'd sent me over to the Fort Lewis CID office to help them out, as they were even more short-handed than we were, and it was they who got me involved in the sting operation they were pulling, and that's what landed me at the court-martial of Lieutenant j.g. Roger Carlson.

So when it came time to hand out the blame for giving me a weekend off in the sun while the rest of my crew was slogging it out back up in the frozen wastes of Washington, hand it to Chavez.

Either him, of course, or Carlson himself.

Carlson had been a reserve naval pilot, called up early during the Persian Gulf flap. For about six months he'd copiloted a C-5A over a South Pacific route starting at McChord and terminating in Korea, manifesting troops and military cargo.

Unmanifested, however, had been several shipments of Carlson's private cargo of crystal methamphetamine, which he ferried, at some profit, from a source he'd tapped in Seoul.

We'd gotten a tip on his activities, and coordinating with Air

Force CID at McChord, we'd stung him dealing the ice out of the back of his car in the parking lot of the Fort Lewis commissary. Several witnesses, a lot of solid evidence, and a good arrest translated into a firm case against him.

So good, in fact, that until Carlson had fired the JAG officer defending him and brought in Shapiro, I thought the general court I'd been summoned to attend in San Diego would be less of a trial than a simple, quick formality, ending in a ten-to-twenty-year hitch at hard labor for the man.

But now it wouldn't be. Simple and quick, that is, but I still couldn't see its ending differently for Carlson. Not unless I blew it again on Monday—which I damn sure wouldn't!

Driving back to my hotel, I felt guilt-free and just fine. I'd call Chavez, give him the "bad" news, then make a few plans. By the time I got back to the hotel, however, I'd started feeling woozy again. By the time I'd checked in at the front desk, to let them know I was staying on, my knees had gone rubbery. In the elevator, I felt dizzy and quite nauseated.

I got to my room just in time to pass flat out on my bed.

It was after six o'clock when I finally surfaced again, but it was only a semisurfacing, and

a dream was playing itself out.

Leon was in it, and part of the time, I was Leon.

And there were dogs—big, black, and relentless; and we were all at war with one another, slowly tearing ourselves to shreds, while a tall man with a baseball bat kept swinging at our heads, keeping us where we were—and it just kept on that way until I finally got mad and took the bat away from the man . . .

And then I knew who he was, and woke up in a cold sweat and with a splitting headache.

After a shower, a change of clothes, and a small steak and salad in the hotel's restaurant, I looked him up in the phone book.

The number, when I dialed it, was busy, however. Because I'd already made up my mind to see him anyway, I drove out to his Coronado address.

Grumman, John F., Captain, USN.

He wasn't a friend exactly, but a dozen or so years ago, when we'd both been assigned to a counterterrorist unit in West Germany, we'd worked together closely for a while; closely enough so that I should have been able to recognize him sooner, but he'd changed.

Changed a lot, I realized, as if more than years had happened to him.

I wondered how I'd looked to him.

He lived just off base in a high-rent neighborhood, his house at the end of a cul-de-sac rather removed from the other houses on the street. After parking I sat for a while and thought my way through my reasons for seeing him. Because it wasn't for old time's sake.

I wanted to see him about Leon Montoya.

I mean, he *wasn't* my problem!

And some stockade time might be just what he needed to cool him off, and I *didn't* feel guilty about what I'd done to his face because he hadn't left me much choice, and I was sorry about the death of his father, but not *that* sorry.

But I was going to see Grumman because I didn't need Leon Montoya in my dreams, and Shapiro's request that I do so was like a chancre in my conscience. This was my chance to get rid of it.

Checking the number on the front gate of Grumman's home, I saw that the house was actually two separate units.

They were connected by a closed garage but divided by a six foot high steel-mesh fence that looped out from the garage, edged both sides of the two-lane driveway where a

newish-looking, tan-colored pickup was parked, ran down to the sidewalk, then square-circled back around both houses.

Grumman's was the house on the left, and I pressed the buzzer at the gate.

While waiting I admired the sharp barbs that topped the fence and the sign hanging just to one side of the gate that read BEWARE OF DOG.

"Who is it?" a male voice metallically hissed at me from a speaker above the gate.

I told him who I was, and after only a brief hesitation, the voice told me to come in. A buzzer sounded, and the lock in the gate popped open. I pushed through and heard the gate swing shut with a heavy clatter behind me.

Grumman, leaning on a cane and wearing a sweatshirt, jeans, and a frown on his face, opened the front door of his house as I got to the front steps.

"I know you, don't I?" he said, peering at me. "From somewhere else. Before this morning, I mean." He looked at my name tag. "Virginiak," he murmured.

"Berlin," I told him. "Seventy-eight. Seventy-nine. You worked at the embassy, and I was assigned to . . ."

"Fifth Counterintelligence, right?"

"Yes, sir."

He smiled slightly and nodded. "I thought so. Well, come on in. Please." He held the door open, and I stepped inside. "It's a long time and a long way from Germany," he said with a sigh.

"Yes, it is," I agreed, facing him. And then he looked me over as I did him—and I decided he was a longer way from Germany than I.

Grumman was older than I was, fiftyish now, with not a lot of his sandy red hair left to warm his scalp. He was tall, long-limbed, with big hands and feet to go with an oversized head. He had a sea-weathered face that I remember was quite adept at smiling—but he didn't do much smiling that night.

In fact, his face looked rather drawn and a bit haunted by thoughts he didn't voice.

He hmph'd, finally, then led me into a living room and told me to sit down, which I did, on an overstuffed sofa. "Can I get you a drink?" he asked.

I pointed to my head. "I'd better not, sir. Thank you."

"How about some coffee?" he offered, pointing to an electric pot on the table in front of me where he'd evidently been doing some paperwork.

I said coffee sounded good, and he poured me a cup while upstairs I heard the sound of muffled female voices.

One of the voices was saying, "I don't care. I don't *care!*," over and over. The other voice was too soft to hear clearly.

Grumman pretended not to hear anything, so I pretended along with him.

When he'd put my coffee down on the table in front of me, Grumman seated himself in an old recliner. "So," he said to me, "how on earth did you happen to be there in that hallway this morning, Virginiak?"

And I told him.

I told him about what I was doing there, and then I told him about my talk with Shapiro and young Montoya.

And after I told him that the lawyer had talked me out of pressing charges against the young marine, and was about to tell him why I was there, he interrupted me gruffly. "That lawyer is a real operator," he said ruefully.

"Montoya seems genuine enough."

"Too genuine," Grumman agreed emphatically. "He really wants to kill me."

I was about to say that it might not be as bad as that when the sound of a woman crying upstairs filled the air.

If Grumman heard, the only indication was a slight deepening of the haunted look his face still showed.

"Listen to me," he said qui-

etly. "I had no idea those dogs were capable of doing what they did—really!" He shook his head. "This chief petty officer of mine retired a few months ago, and he didn't want to ship them home so he gave them to me. I thought they'd make good guard dogs." He sighed. "We've lived here two years, and we've been broken into twice. Luckily, both times no one was home, but I have a wife and teenaged daughter who live here, and I'm away a lot."

The crying woman quieted down then, and the respite seemed to hearten Grumman. "They were fine looking animals," he told me. "Friendly enough with me and my family." His eyes frowned, but his mouth smiled curiously. "Frankly, after I'd had them a while, I had strong doubts about their usefulness as guard dogs." He leaned forward and raised his hands. "I just don't know how they'd been trained."

I sipped at my coffee. "You let them run loose?"

"Inside the fence," he replied, then he stood. "Come on, I'll show you."

He took me out through the kitchen and through a heavily barred and electronically secured side door that led to the garage. It took him two tries to punch out the right sequence on the wall panel before it let

us pass. The garage was crowded with a large station wagon on Grumman's side and a small, tarp-covered sports car on the other. The back wall of the garage was actually more high fencing, and Grumman waved to the darkened back yard beyond it. "The dogs stayed pretty much behind the house," he told me, pointing to where a large box-shaped doghouse stood against the back fence, "but they could get around to the front on the other side of the house. There's an alley where the fence stands a few feet away from the wall on the other side." He put his hands onto the steel mesh fence and stared out into the darkness. "The animals had to be destroyed, naturally." He kept staring in the direction of the empty doghouse, then looked back at me. "I really am very sorry, you know."

"I'm sure you are, sir."

"About Montoya's father, I mean."

"I know."

Just then, above and to the right, I heard a noise, and I noticed a man on the roof of the other house. He was straddling the roof, adjusting the angle of a good-sized satellite dish that was mounted there.

Grumman looked where I looked and said, "My neighbor."

"He'd better be careful, working in the dark like that."

"He's a real electronics nut. When I put up the fence after the last break-in, he put in all the electronics on the gates, the doors, and the garage. We fenced both houses at the same time."

"Sounds like a lot of security," I told him, with no particular emphasis.

But he replied a bit defensively, "My wife is—rather nervous when she's alone."

"That's understandable."

"We *had* been broken into twice before."

"Yes, sir."

"She—I thought making the place more secure was the prudent thing to do."

"Yes, sir."

He started to go on with his defense but caught himself and frowned the rest of the words away.

I said, "You were away the night it happened, I understand."

He nodded. "All of us were away last Sunday night. Up in Los Angeles for the three day weekend. Lieutenant Hexalt was taking care of the dogs while we were gone. He found the body."

"Lieutenant Hexalt?"

He nodded and looked back up to the man on the roof next door. "Hey, Terry!"

The man glanced down from his work. "Yes, sir."

"Would you mind coming down for a minute?" He waved a hand at me. "This man would like to ask you some questions about last Sunday night."

"Sure," he replied, and disappeared over the other side of the roof before I could tell him not to bother.

A few seconds later the man entered the garage from his own side door and came over to us with a curious grin on his face. Grumman introduced us, and we shook hands.

Lieutenant Terry Hexalt was a tall man, though not as tall as Grumman. In his mid-thirties, but with a boyishly freckled Howdy Doody face that included a pair of stuck-out ears and a head of thick red hair.

A just-as-thick red mustache he wore seemed out of place, but I decided that he probably grew it to be taken seriously.

"Well," he said with a small shrug, "there's not much I can say about what happened. It was around 0200. I was sleeping, and I heard the dogs. I didn't think anything of it at first. But they kept it up, so I went outside and looked." He shook his head with regret. "By then it was over."

"Montoya was dead already?"

His eyes widened briefly.

"Oh, yes," he said with heavy emphasis. "He was very dead. And the dogs were out of control. I couldn't get inside to get them away from the body. I called 911. It was all I could do."

"I'm sure it was."

He shrugged again.

I pointed toward the closed garage door. "The garage and front gate were locked, I suppose?"

"They were," said Hexalt, showing me a small black, multibuttoned device that looked like the remote control of a TV. "They can only be unlocked with a remote like this, or from the panels inside the house."

"Can the locks be defeated?"

He glanced at Grumman, who was back to staring into the blackness of his back yard. "Probably," Hexalt told me. "Like any other device. But they hadn't been." He pointed toward the front of the house. "The poor man must have hauled himself over the fence. He should have believed the sign out front."

He might have, I thought, if he could have read it, but I didn't say so.

Just then a woman from inside Grumman's house called to him, and the captain excused himself and hurried inside.

And then for some reason

there was an awkward moment while Hexalt and I said nothing, as if, somehow, we were both anticipating what was going to happen.

Voices from the house came out to us, suddenly: Grumman's pleading and soothing, the woman's angry, rapid, and high-pitched, and then she began to sob loudly and quite hysterically.

For a moment Hexalt and I avoided each other's eyes, as if we were committing some social error by simply being where we were, but then the sobbing increased in intensity. Grumman was still talking to her, trying without success to diminish her anguish, and then another female voice could be heard.

"Poor lady," said Hexalt hoarsely, shaking his head.

I said nothing as the woman's crying continued, but then I nodded toward the street. "I suppose I should leave," I told him.

Hexalt led me to the front of the garage and punched buttons on the panel that raised the door. When we were both outside on the driveway, the sounds from inside Grumman's house were muted but still in the air.

"I wish there was something I could do," said Hexalt helplessly. "For them both. They're

good people, Mr. Virginiak."

"They seem to be."

He walked with me down to where my car was parked. "All this security," he said with a weary sigh.

I looked at him looking back at the Grumman's house.

"It was her idea," he said with his back to me. "The captain's wife, I mean. She started going to pieces after their house was broken into the first time. When it happened again, she was hysterical for days. Now I think she's on the verge of a breakdown, and I..." He stopped then, as if suddenly aware of the things he was saying, then looked back at me and shrugged with embarrassment. "Well, I just wish there was something I could do, but there isn't."

I lit a cigarette and felt my head throb.

"The dogs were a mistake," he went on. "But the captain didn't know what they were like. He didn't think they'd ever do anything but bark." He snorted. "He treated them as if they were pets, but I knew the chief who'd trained them, and I'll tell you, they were not man's best friend."

"I see."

Hexalt stared at me for a long moment. "You're not investigating this incident, are you, Mr. Virginiak?"

"No, sir."

"That's CIC brass on your lapel, isn't it?"

I nodded and smiled. "It is, but it's nothing like that," I said.

He glanced back at the house. "Because they've had enough trouble," he told me. "And I wouldn't like it if someone wanted to make any more trouble for them."

I hadn't a clue as to what he was talking about, but I was tired and I didn't really want to know. I said, "You're a good neighbor for them to have, lieutenant." He frowned back at me and shook his head slowly, then abruptly his eyes fixed on the "Beware of Dog" sign that still hung on the fence.

"Well," he said, "the last thing she needs is to be reminded of that." He reached up and tried to remove it from the outside of the fence, but it was hinged on the inside, so he took out his remote and beeped the lock open, stepped inside Grumman's front yard, and took the sign down.

Coming back out onto the sidewalk, he tossed the sign into a large dumpster that was nearby. "The dogs were one bad idea," he said.

We shook hands again briefly, and he went back into the garage as I got into my car. I'd just started the engine when

Grumman appeared on the front steps of his house.

He waved at me, then jogged down the walkway, through the gate, and up to my car window. "I'm sorry about that," he told me. "Really."

"I'm sorry for your trouble, sir."

He stood back from the car and shoved his hands deep into his pockets. "It's been a hard week for us," he explained. "My wife had become quite attached to the dogs. We were all pretty shocked about what happened, and this whole business has just been a bit too much for her."

I nodded and said, "It's been a bit too much for Corporal Montoya."

He blinked at me.

"He's had a pretty bad week, too, sir."

He stared at me for a long moment, then his mouth shaped itself into a grim line. "Men have to learn to control themselves no matter what the provocation." He cocked his head to one side. "Men who don't, pay a price."

I stared back at him for a moment—because I didn't know what to say in the face of such an unforgiving philosophy—then I told him goodnight and left.

I was back in my hotel room by ten P.M. I wasn't tired but my

head was aching again, so I popped two more pills, put myself in bed, and watched old movies till dawn. One of which was an ancient, flickering, black and white rendition of *Cyrano de Bergerac*; and in a straining mental leap, it put me in mind of Indian Red, whoever and wherever he was.

Indian Red.

Who did war dances when he was feeling good and wrote letters to the sons of friends. I wonder if *his* luck ever changed, because Joe Montoya's hadn't.

And I didn't think so—but I didn't let it get me down.

I slept the sleep of the righteous and woke up from dreams of peace and justice around noon, feeling smug and pretty fit, and put a call through to Fort Lewis.

Chavez wasn't in, naturally, because it was a Saturday, and short-handed or not, it would take the threat of Armageddon to get him to work on a weekend. So I described my situation to the SDO—a reserve captain named Hilton—who was so ditzzy Chavez had him catching phones permanently. He seemed almost-sympathetic, as if I were working my tail off in hostile territory or something, and asked if there was anything he could do to help.

I told him I thought I could handle the situation.

Afterwards I had a big breakfast in my room; then I made it down to the beach where I loafed with Flaubert and ogled the occasional string bikini for the rest of the day.

That night, after dinner, I took a long walk, checked in at a couple of bars where I risked a few beers, then settled down in one that played what they call "old soft rock" and stayed a couple of hours, flirting with the waitress.

And thinking about how tough and smart I was going to be when Shapiro, poor fool, got me on the stand again Monday morning.

Sunday was much like Saturday, but instead of the beach, I made it out to sea, renting a sailboat and spending most of the day racing peremptory heats over short distances with others in similar craft. By the time the sun set, I was exhausted and spent the evening in my room watching a Kung Fu movie marathon.

And thinking how cool and clever I'd be when Shapiro started asking his silly, irrelevant questions the next day.

And then it was Monday.

I got up early enough to get in an hour's run down the harbor road with about a zillion others, then I showered,

changed, had a light breakfast in the hotel restaurant, and left for the naval base early.

And along the way rehearsed again the testimony Shapiro would be bound to drag me over in court until I had my responses down as cold and deadly as I could predict.

I felt smart, cruel, and ready.

I arrived at the naval base courthouse a half hour before I was due there. I'd just parked and was approaching the front door when Shapiro and Corporal Montoya—black-eyed and bandage-nosed—were leaving.

The lawyer beamed at me. "Mr. Virginiak!"

I nodded at them both. "Mr. Shapiro. Corporal Montoya."

"Captain Grumman just left," Shapiro told me. "He talked to the judge. He's not pressing charges, so we won't face a general court." He clapped Montoya on the shoulder. "He'll face an Article 15, reduction in rank, and a fine, but he's going to be all right. Aren't you, Leon?"

"Yes, sir." The young man gave me a serious look. "Captain Grumman said I should thank you for this."

I smiled, and feeling a bit merciful said, "You should be thanking Mr. Shapiro here."

Leon smiled back, and I noticed with some relief that

they'd managed, somehow, to replant the tooth I knocked out of his mouth on Friday. He said to Shapiro, "I know I should. I owe you a lot, sir."

"Nah," the lawyer waved a hand. "Hey! How about I buy us all coffee?"

I said, "What about the Carlson court-martial?"

Shapiro shrugged. "It's done. Didn't they tell you?"

I stared at the little man. "Done?"

He nodded. "We pled him down to possession with intent to distribute, second degree. He'll get five years, do two and a half. Three tops. He's happy with it, and the JAG office can live with it."

I could only gawk at him.

He gave me a half smile. "You got a problem with that?"

I didn't answer him, because I couldn't.

In a state of mild shock, I checked in with Captain Blackmun, who confirmed what Shapiro had said, and when I asked him if my weak performance on the stand Friday had been a factor in the bargain they opted for, he told me, halfheartedly, that it hadn't.

I didn't really believe him, though, and I'd started to argue with him about the plea—and how I really could do better—when he decided he was very

busy, the case was closed, thanks for my trouble, and adios, amigo.

Which put me in the hall outside his office, still a little stunned and not a little angry—and then Carlson himself strolled by.

Short, stocky, black-haired, and beetle-browed.

Along with two guards, he was on his way back to the brig, and as he passed, he gave me one of those pleasant, life's-a-bowl-of-cherries looks—and I think he even laughed.

And then I was mad as hell.

I caught up with Shapiro and the young marine at a nearby snack bar—where I bought my own damned coffee!—and after sitting down at their table asked Shapiro straight out if I was to blame.

He frowned at me and shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Blame?"

"Did Blackmun plead Carlson down because of last Friday?" I asked.

He stared at me for a moment, then said, "Well, I don't know if you could call it blame . . ."

"Knock it off, *okay*." I felt my face reddening. "Did my testimony Friday scare Blackmun off?"

He took his time answering. "Yes," he finally said. "You were why it got settled."

I could hear my back teeth grind.

I watched him sip at his coffee and look pleased with himself.

I said, "And I suppose you're *proud* of the job you did?"

He looked up at me, a little surprised, and began to answer—but then he just shook his head slightly and sighed.

"*Proud* of the way justice was served?" I asked him.

Shapiro put his eyes on the wall behind me and said nothing.

"Proud of the *clever* way you tied me into knots last Friday, and manipulated Blackmun into cutting a bad deal . . ."

"Now, wait a minute!"

I glared at him.

"Look," he said reasonably. "I got you good on Friday, right?"

I laughed at him.

"Right," he replied to his own question. "I made you look a little silly. Made you look a little uncertain. Vague about certain aspects of the arrest." He smiled and shrugged helplessly. "That's my job, okay?"

I took a breath and counted to ten.

"But," the lawyer went on, pointing a finger in my direction, "I figure you just weren't prepared for me then."

"I am *now*!" I told him harshly.

"I know," he agreed with energy. "I figured you would be. And I didn't think I'd get you that way again." He shrugged. "But if I didn't put you back up on the stand, Blackmun would—so I did my best deal I could for my client."

"To get him off easy."

He sighed again with some exasperation. "What would you have me do, Warrant Officer Virginiak?"

"What's right!" I snapped at him.

"Which is *what*, precisely?" he snapped back.

"Letting the trial run its course," I said.

His magnified eyes screwed up at me. "I see," he said. "That's what really bothers you, isn't it?"

I didn't know what he meant, and didn't care.

He snorted. "Not having a chance to parry with me again and show your stuff."

I shook my head pityingly at him and then looked at Leon, who was gawking at us both. "You've got one smart lawyer here, Leon. I hope you appreciate that."

The young man gave me a half smile framed with a lot of uncertainty.

I looked back at Shapiro, shook my head with grievous disappointment, had some of my coffee, counted to ten

again—and then let most of my anger go.

Because there was little point in holding onto it.

"Well," I said finally. "At least the sonofabitch will do time."

Shapiro gave me a curious look. "Of course, that's what's really important to you, right?"

I stared at him. "Shouldn't it be?"

"I don't know," he said. "It seems to me the agenda's pretty mixed."

I spoke with irritation. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He opened his mouth to explain but then only smiled and shook his head, and there was an annoying air of dismissal on his face.

"Look," he said, glancing at his watch, "I gotta fly."

He stood up and turned to Leon. "You lighten up on yourself, kiddo," he told him, letting his hand be shaken by the young marine, who'd also stood. "Stay in touch."

Leon seemed a little embarrassed but mumbled something; then Shapiro turned to me and offered his hand. "No hard feelings?"

I didn't want to, but I stood up and shook his hand. "No hard feelings," I lied.

A few minutes later, Leon

and I also left, and because I was headed north and Montoya was headed up to the brig at Camp Pendleton to check out, I gave him a lift.

He was silent for most of the trip, which was good because it gave me a chance to cool off some more. I didn't want to bite his head off, too, but I was still angry, now with myself. The more I cooled off, the more I realized that my anger toward Shapiro had been pretty much misdirected.

The fact was that he had only been doing his job, it had been Blackmun who'd blown it.

Shapiro, whom I'd been fantasizing about making a fool of in court, had had more faith in me than Blackmun. It was Blackmun who'd misjudged me.

Which didn't make me any happier at the moment, but it had been stupid of me to take it out on Shapiro. I needed a bit of quiet to think things through, and Leon obliged.

Once we were on Pendleton, however, the young man said, "Funny, isn't it?"

I looked at him.

He grinned. "I mean, I bang you around last Friday, and today we're . . ." He shrugged at what we were—whatever that was. "Well, you know."

I nodded.

He frowned. "Uh. Seriously,

though. How's your head?"

"It's fine, Leon. Just fine." I looked at him. "How's yours?"

"Okay." He sighed heavily. "I'm not like I was last week, you know."

"That's good to hear."

"I just couldn't see it. My father, I mean. Ending up like that." He shook his head. "I realize, though, it wasn't Captain Grumman's fault. My father . . . he shouldn't have been there is all."

I said nothing because there was nothing to say.

And he kept still, too, until I stopped the car in front of the brig, and then waited while he stayed sitting.

"It's just so hard to believe," he said finally, in a wondering tone of voice, "that he was trying to break into that house. That he'd become a thief! He'd never done anything dishonest in his whole life. Even the cops said he had no record, except . . . you know. Drunk and disorderly. Panhandling. Like that."

The fact was that everybody had no record until they gave themselves one, but I didn't say so. He was silent for a moment, then sighed and shook his head. "I should have sent him some money."

"What would he have done with it, Leon?"

He squinted at me, then

sighed again. "He would've bought wine."

I said nothing then because I didn't have to.

Leon Montoya got out of the car, then leaned back in the window and said, "My father's funeral is day after tomorrow."

I nodded and said, "I won't be here, Leon."

"Oh." He smiled. "Well. Thanks for . . . you know."

I knew.

So that was that.

And I was all dressed up with nowhere to go, except my hotel room, so I went there and put a call in to my office and told the SDO—Hilton again—that I'd be coming home.

The diddlehead seemed happy for me.

After I'd booked myself on a flight to Tacoma with an ETD of 1800, packed up, and checked out of my room, it was only a little after one P.M., and I had one less place to go, so I went to the airport.

Five hours early, I know, but the fact is I *like* airports, which is a good thing because I spend a lot of time in them.

I arrived at San Diego International at around one thirty, returned my rental, found a coffee shop, and put myself at a table that watched over the main concourse where I spent

the next few hours reading Flaubert and people watching and thinking about what Shapiro had said.

I decided I really needed to lighten up on myself a little, too. It seemed that the older I get, the better my image of myself becomes, and the less tolerant I am of anyone or anything that demeans that image.

The fact is, I *had* been working with a mixed agenda—because I didn't really care one way or another what happened to Carlson.

He could have gotten ten years' hard labor, or the damned Legion of Merit.

I didn't really care.

What bothered me was just what Shapiro had said—that I'd been sloppy on Friday and the image had suffered.

The image of a perfect operator; a money player; smart, tough, cool under fire; a ready-for-anything-anytime kind of guy. The image had taken a beating; it had been put on trial itself.

And then it didn't get *its* day in court, and that's what had gotten me sore.

I was, despite myself, still sore. But shortly before five, I tried to call Shapiro to apologize. He wasn't in, but I got his address with the idea of dropping him a line.

At five fifteen—showtime—I

picked up my boarding pass and went along to the gate, where I was pretty much alone, bought a newspaper, and sat down to read it.

By five forty there was a pretty thick throng inside the gate, and I'd finished with most of the paper.

At five forty-five, they announced boarding, and people began to line up, but I stayed seated and worked my way through some local crime news.

At five fifty, they actually began boarding, so I got at the back of the line, still reading the paper.

I'd about gotten to the door when I came across this:

Police announced today that there are still no suspects and no firm evidence in the apparent hit and run accident that occurred a week ago last Friday in a Chelsea Street parking lot near Horton Plaza.

The accident, which claimed the life of James "Indian Red" Tiexiera, of no known address, has been classified as felony hit and run, and although the police say there was an eyewitness, the information provided proved unreliable, and the investigation is at a dead end.

The police are asking

the public for help. If anyone has any information that might be of assistance to the police in their investigation, they are asked to call Detective Sergeant William Smithson, at 555-6565 day or evening.

And then, Mr: Smart-Tough-Cool-Under-Fire-and-Ready-for-Anything didn't know what to do.

I mean, it might have been another Indian Red, and even if it wasn't, I didn't really know anything, and even if I did, what difference could it make?

But somewhere in the back of my mind, something like a question had been forming.

Something like a problem that didn't have words to it yet.

Something.

Not much, but enough to leave me frozen with indecision.

I stood out of the line, which was about all gone anyway, and after exchanging a minute's worth of confused looks with the ticket agent at the gate, I said, "I'll be right back," and made a dash for a telephone, which turned out to be some distance away but I got right through and asked for Smithson and they put me on hold.

So I stood there, feeling stupidly indecisive, and waited.

Six P.M.

Final call on my flight came and went, and I was still standing there, listening to stupid Burt Bachrach's stupid Rain Drops Keep Falling on my Stupid Head, stupid waiting, for stupid Detective Sergeant William stupid Smithson.

Six oh-one P.M.

Hang up! I told myself. Get on the plane and call him from Tacoma.

Six oh-two P.M.

What difference does it make! I thought. *Hang up the stupid phone, and get on the stupid plane now!*

"Smithson's not in. Can I take a message?" a voice asked.

I hung up and ran back to the gate—in time to see the L-1011 wheeling away.

But I stayed calm.

At least, I didn't throw the fit a part of me wanted to throw.

I was having a bad week.

That's all.

Nothing to get excited about.

What's one missed plane, after all?

I walked back to the coffee shop and had a cup of coffee, and after telling myself that I might have handled things better, telling myself all the things I should have done, and calling myself every stupid name I could think of, I felt better.

When I was all the way

calmed down but feeling as foolish as I should have, I went back to the ticket counter, where they were nice enough to get me a seat on the first morning flight for only a surcharge, and then I called my hotel and reserved my room again.

I also called my office in Fort Lewis once more—Lieutenant Reilly this time, a pugnaciously hardnosed RA officer who didn't like me to begin with—and after I'd explained my problem, we smarted off to each other for awhile, and I think I got the best of it.

Finally, feeling I was on a roll, I called Smithson's number again. Once I'd identified myself satisfactorily, I was told that he was presently at the office of the county medical examiner and I could possibly reach him there.

I tried the number they gave me, but got a recording.

Thinking things through, and deciding that I didn't want to leave them until the last moment again—I wanted to talk to Smithson—I caught a cab to the morgue.

The building that housed the office of the county M. E. was closed by the time I got there, but the security guard, who let me in anyway, said that everyone was downstairs, as if there was

a party going on and I looked like a guest. I went downstairs.

In a freezing room the size of a basketball court, I found the party, though most of the body-bagged and toe-tagged guests, who were stretched out on a dozen or so tables in the room, didn't appear to be mingling much.

At the far end of the room, the host, a young man in a dirty white smock, sitting at a desk and eating a sandwich, looked up at me and frowned as I walked over to him.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"I don't know," I told him. "I'm looking for Detective Smithson."

"Smithson just left."

Great.

The young man took a bite of his sandwich. "I'm Dr. Neubauer. Is there something I could help you with?"

"I doubt it," I told him, frowning around the room and wondering what to do next. "You've been busy."

"Two shootings and a three-car," he said, waving his sandwich at the carnage spread over the tables. "We've got the lockers full, so we just stack them here." He looked back at me. "Actually, you're not supposed to be here, you know."

"My name is Virginiak," I said and I showed him my I.D., and then I told him, vaguely,

why I was looking for Smithson. Vaguely, because I still wasn't certain myself.

"Well," he said when I'd finished, "if you know anything about that hit and run, you should see Smithson."

I nodded. "I suppose there's no question about its being an accident?"

He shrugged at that. "That's what it looks like, but if you think differently, like I said, you really should see . . ."

"Smithson. Right." I smiled a little self-mockery. "I don't know anything really. It's just that there was another death a few nights later. A man named Montoya, and he and Indian Red were friends, so . . ."

"Montoya?"

"Right, he and . . ."

"The dog thing. Sure, I got them both here." He frowned at me. "You say they were friends?"

"That seems to be the case."

"Well . . ."

"This Indian Red," I said. "He was definitely run down?"

He popped the rest of his sandwich in his mouth, then stood up. "Take a look for yourself."

He led me down a corridor to a room with a wall of small square doors at the end. Putting on a pair of gloves, he pulled one of the doors open. "I did the initial workup on this

one," he told me as he hauled out a drawer on which a black-bagged lump was stretched. "A week ago Saturday."

"I thought he was killed the night before?"

"Right," he replied, tugging the zipper down. "But the body wasn't found till the next day."

He pulled the black plastic away from the yellow-black corpse and showed me the man who'd once been Indian Red, whose war dancing, letter-writing days were gone.

He was mid-fiftyish, with long, thinning red hair, and as dead as dead gets.

Neubauer turned the dead man's head slightly. "See the treadmarks over the back of the head and neck?"

I did and told him so.

"Wide and deep. I figure they're new. Truck tires." He pulled the plastic the rest of the way off the body. "The way I see it, the man was lying down at the time. Probably passed out. There was a lot of alcohol in his system."

"The truck—" he continued, then shrugged. "At least I think it's a truck—backed over him and crushed his head. The front tires—see here?—they were turning as they passed over his hip. Aside from that, and the fact that his liver was the size of a football, I didn't find anything else that would

have been immediately contributory to his death."

"I see."

He frowned suddenly. "Did Montoya drive a truck?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

His frown turned inward. "I don't, either," he said, and for a moment seemed lost in thought.

"Well," I said, "thank you, for your time and . . ."

"But even if he *did* have a truck, he couldn't have driven it." I didn't know what he was talking about. He nodded to himself, zippered Indian Red back up in his plastic suit, closed the drawer, and then opened another door and showed me old Joe Montoya.

"Look at those hands," he said. "All his joints were affected . . . hey! Are you all right?"

I'd backed away a little and leaned clumsily against the wall. I suppose my face had shown that I hadn't been expecting to see what I had.

Neubauer covered Montoya's remains with a mildly horrified look on his face. "I'm really sorry," he said. "I thought . . ." He looked terribly embarrassed.

"It's all right," I told him. "I just didn't realize how much damage the dogs had done."

He nodded without looking at me. "Pit bulls. Heavy, strong

jaws. They go for the throat and groin because of the high concentrations of blood—and they can smell it." He pointed at the bagged body. "They don't usually chew and tear like that, though. Not like . . ." He shook his head. "I'm really sorry about . . ."

"It's all right," I assured him. "Now, what were you saying about his hands?"

He gave me an uncertain look.

"Show me," I said.

He pulled the black plastic aside again, showing me the hands while leaving the rest of the body covered. Actually, they weren't hands so much as they were twisted, knobby-looking claws.

"Extreme osteoarthritis," Neubauer told me. "He couldn't drive a truck with those clubs."

"Could he pull himself up over a chain link fence?"

Neubauer frowned at me. "How tall a fence?"

"About six feet high, with barbs."

His frown deepened, and he looked back down at the dead man's hands. "I doubt it," he said. "The pain would have been extreme, for one thing, and he simply wouldn't have had the dexterity." He moved the bag open a bit more and showed me a pair of swollen knees. "It's not just his hands,

you see. This poor guy would have been in pain just walking around. I can't see him hauling himself over a fence."

I nodded, then moved the black plastic aside to see Montoya's face again—or, rather, the shredded, bone-bared, black-stained remains of it—to see if I could make out something of León in what was left.

But there was nothing of anyone left in it.

I was back at my hotel and checked in again by seven thirty and tried calling Smithson again. I was told he was gone for the day, but he'd get my message to call me ASAP, which I hoped would be soon. By nine P.M. he hadn't called, and then I had an impulse, and acted on it.

I changed into civvies and went out looking for the Chelsea Street parking structure where Indian Red Tiexiera had paid his rent for his cold-drawer apartment at the morgue.

Chelsea, I was told by the night desk clerk, ran parallel to the coast highway that fronted the hotel, so I went out into the warm night and walked two blocks south, then turned up Broadway, a wide, well-lit stretch of asphalt that divided a busy business district, and a couple blocks on came to Chel-

sea. There were at least half a dozen parking structures on both sides of the street.

I walked south because north seemed a bit too upscale, and after a while the thoroughfare narrowed somewhat, the street lights were a little dimmer, and business wasn't so good. I checked a few bars and liquor stores where men like Joe Montoya and Indian Red Tiexiera might have gotten in the door once or twice, asking storekeepers and bartenders if they'd known them, but it was a busy night and no one I talked to cared enough to remember. And I wondered what I cared about. Because the problem or question I had at the back of my mind still hadn't acquired words, which left me not knowing what I thought I was doing or why.

A bar at the end of Chelsea, near where it emptied into Harbor Drive, looked seedy, dim, and likely, and I decided to make it a last stop. It was called Friendlies, and there was a mournful country-western tune leaking out from it as I went inside.

Friendlies was a long, narrow room taken up with a wide bar along which several men and one old woman at the far end sat on stools and drooped over their drinks.

A young, short, stocky bar-

tender with a lot of long straight black hair falling from his head and a clubfoot penguin-stepped down his side of the bar to where I took a seat, tossed a side of his hair away from his face with a practiced gesture, told me his name was Roger, and asked me what I wanted.

I wanted a beer, and he brought it to me, and then I wanted to know if he knew a man named Joe Montoya.

"Old Joe Montoya?" He looked down at the rest of his customers as if one of them might be listening. They weren't. "Sure I knew him. A rummy. Or wino, or whatever. But he used to come in sometimes when he had a taste for hard stuff but not enough money for a bottle." He leaned over the bar toward me. "He's dead, you know."

"I know."

He nodded. "Tried to break into some house in Coronado, and some dogs chewed him to pieces." His eyes widened, and he made a face.

"How about a man named Indian Red?"

He frowned at me slightly. "Sure," he said. "Him, too. I mean, he's dead, too." He wagged a thumb north. "Got run over in that new parking structure they put up on the corner of Seventh and Chelsea."

I nodded because I'd passed the thing on my way here, then sipped at my beer, which was sour and flat. "I was told they were friends."

"Yeah," the young man said with another look at his completely uninterested row of customers. "They was pals. Leastways, I always seen 'em together, y'know?"

"Did you know them well?"

He smiled a row of gapped teeth at me. "Hey. They was bums, y'know? Two old rummies who come in here once in a while." He snorted and tossed back the other half of his curtain of hair. "Did I know 'em well? How well do you think I wanted to know 'em?"

"Did they hang out with anyone else?"

He shrugged. "They had each other. What can I say? I didn't pay much attention."

I pretended to have another drink of my beer, then put money on the bar, which included a dollar's tip. "Do you know if they lived around here?"

He laughed shortly. "They lived where they fell, man. Who knows?" He picked up the money, nodded at the tip, and said, "Can I hit you again?"

He couldn't.

I walked back to the parking lot with some idea of scouting around inside for something,

but it was five stories tall and there was no indication of where the accident had occurred and I didn't know what I thought I was doing there anyway so I left.

The parking lot was at the back of a block of various retail stores, most of them closed, but I walked the block, looking in windows, right to the end.

I stopped at the corner and looked down the side street where a few more smaller stores were located and wondered how hard it would be to flag a cab at that time of night.

And then, about to turn away and get on with the rest of my life, I looked up at a still blazing neon sign that hung over the sidewalk in front of the store farthest from the corner . . .

And then I put it together.

Which is not entirely true.

I didn't put it all together then, but I had a strong idea, and, after I'd talked to a few people, including, finally, Smithson, things fell into place.

I rang the bell at his front gate, and he took his time answering, but when he did, he sounded a bit breathless. "Lieutenant Hexalt," I said into the speaker, "I'm Warrant Officer Virgin- iak. We met last Friday."

"I remember you," his electric voice replied.

"I wonder if I might ask you a few questions?"

"Concerning?"

"Concerning the death of Joseph Montoya."

There was a rather long hesitation then, but eventually he buzzed me through. He was waiting at the front door for me when I got there. He was wearing a bathrobe, and his hair was wet, and he looked a little cross.

"I don't understand, Mr. Virgin- iak," he said. "Are you conducting an investigation into this business or what?"

"Or what, I suppose. May I come in?"

He gave me a look of mild consternation, but he didn't want me to leave. He ushered me into his living room, which was overloaded with various electronic entertainment devices including a large screen TV that hulked along the wall.

I said, "I hope I'm not intruding, sir. Is your wife at home?"

He waved me to a large U-shaped leather sofa where he and I sat, across from each other. "There is no wife, Mr. Virgin- iak," he said in an if-it's-any-of-your-business way. "I share this house with another officer, who is at sea at the moment."

"I see," I said.

And then he waited pointedly for me.

"Well," I told him, as genially as possible, "the truth of the matter is, I should be on my way back to Fort Lewis, right this minute . . ."

"But you're not."

"No, sir," I said seriously. "Some things about what happened have been bothering me, and then I found out something that I just couldn't put out of my mind."

He nodded and frowned. "So, here you are."

"Yes, sir. Here I am."

He stared at me for a long moment, then he snorted, rolled his eyes, got up, and asked me if I wanted a beer. I told him a beer would be good, and he fetched us both a bottle. Once he was back in his seat, he sighed wearily and said, "So, what's been bothering you, Mr. Virginiak?"

I took a pull on the bottle. "Well," I said slowly, "I suppose, the first thing is how Joe Montoya got inside that fence around the Grummans' house."

He took a sip from his own bottle.

"I mean, you did say the gate was locked, and so was the garage?"

"Yes," he replied. "So he scaled the fence. It's a high fence, but not that high."

"No, sir," I agreed. "It's not

that high, but it was probably too high for Joseph Montoya to scale."

He frowned slightly.

"Montoya had osteoarthritis, sir. Very bad. I saw his hands at the morgue this evening."

He gave that a little thought, then said, "Maybe he was tough."

I smiled at him. "Maybe. But the pathologist doubts he could have done it."

Hexalt stretched out a bit and looked bored. "Well. It's a mystery then. Right?"

I nodded. "Maybe. Maybe not." He put his head back on the top of the sofa and watched me through slitted eyes.

"Now, another thing that bothered me, sir, was what Montoya was doing here to begin with."

"It didn't bother the police, Mr. Virginiak."

"No, sir. I realize the police suspected he'd been trying to break into the captain's quarters." I smiled again. "The thing is, he'd never done anything like that before. He had no record for burglary, and this neighborhood is pretty far from his usual hangouts. So, if he were going to suddenly start a career in housebreaking, why come all the way out here?"

"No one would know him in this neighborhood," he suggested.

"That's true," I agreed. "But the man had no transportation of his own, so he had to either walk or take the bus, and picking this place to break into just doesn't sound reasonable to me." Hexalt said nothing, but his eyes stayed fixed on me.

"And that's the other thing that bothered me, sir." I paused to let him wonder and took another drink of my beer.

"What's that?" he asked in a whispery voice.

I shrugged. "Why Captain Grumman's house?" I told him, then I looked at him and waited.

Hexalt, however, wasn't playing any more.

I sat back and frowned. "I mean, there are a lot of homes in this neighborhood, and a few of them were bound to be empty that night. So, why pick this place where there's a tall fence he'd have to climb to get in?" I let my face show disbelief. "The pathologist assures me that Montoya had to have been in constant pain just from walking around, so why would he pick the only house on the street that had a tall fence around it?"

Hexalt said nothing, but his half-seen eyes flickered with thought.

"Well," I said to him, finishing my beer, "that's what was bothering me, sir."

He smiled slightly. "I'm glad you got it off your chest."

I smiled back and put my empty bottle on the coffee table. He looked up hopefully. "Can I get you another before you go?" he asked.

I shook my head, then lit a cigarette and sat back again. "I read in the paper tonight about a hit and run accident that occurred around ten P.M. Friday, week before last."

Hexalt's mouth sagged open about a micron.

"A man named James Tiexiera, also known as Indian Red."

His eyes narrowed again.

"He and Montoya were friends. Best friends." I shrugged. "Just a couple of old drunks. Living in the streets, down around Horton Plaza."

I took a deep drag on my cigarette and blew it out in a sigh. "Tiexiera was run over by a truck in a parking lot just off Chelsea. He was probably passed out drunk, and the driver of the truck probably backed over him without knowing he was there." I sighed again and shook my head. "I guess it was just one of those things, you know?"

The lieutenant's brow furrowed slightly with the effort of concentration.

"But the driver didn't stop," I went on. "He just kept on go-

ing—as if he'd just hit a bump in the road."

Hexalt's brow cleared slightly.

I knocked some ash from my cigarette into a large stone ashtray on the coffee table. "But he knew it was no bump in the road, sir." I smiled up at him. "He stopped and looked back and saw what he'd done—and then he drove on."

I paused again, to let him think about that; then I said, "I mean, it was clearly an accident, so the only reason I can see for his not stopping was that he didn't think it was worth the hassle."

Hexalt said nothing.

"In any case," I added, "Joe Montoya was a witness."

He sat forward then and took another long drink of his own beer. "Did he report it?"

"Of course he did," I told him, in a you-know-that-as-well-as-I-do way. "Montoya saw the whole thing. He was in the parking lot, too, that night, and he saw it and told the police what he saw."

He nodded. "And?"

I smiled at him. "Well," I said. "Montoya wasn't a very good witness. The man was only semiliterate at best. And according to the detective I spoke with a little while ago, Montoya was half-wasted from liquor himself that night. He

didn't even report the accident until the following morning because he was only semiconscious when it happened. He thought it was just a nightmare he was having and went back to sleep."

Hexalt had begun to lean forward a little.

"Next morning when he woke up in that parking lot and found his dead friend, he thought his dream had come true. And that's exactly what he told the police, sir. He thought his nightmare had come true."

The lieutenant frowned, then sighed and relaxed back on the sofa.

"So," I continued, "his descriptions of the vehicle and the driver were pretty useless, and the police had no luck at all in tracing either. He didn't get a very good look at the driver. He could only say it was a man, and all he could say about the vehicle was that it was a navy truck." I smiled again at him. "That's what he told them, sir. It was a navy truck that killed his friend. A navy truck with a big box in back, and that was it."

Hexalt finished his beer in two noisy gulps.

"The police checked, of course, but there were no military vehicles in the area that night; all were accounted for—and—well, this detective I

spoke with told me he half believed Montoya was hallucinating, so he tended to dismiss Montoya's story." I put out my cigarette. "They were under no real pressure to solve the case, so there wasn't much in the way of an investigation, if you know what I mean, sir."

Hexalt yawned suddenly, then arched his back in a stretch, but when he was done, he nodded at me. "Please go on," he said easily. "Unless that's all."

I smiled at the performance. "The thing is, sir, Montoya couldn't get it out of his mind. That was his best friend—his *only* friend—that got killed, and he knew what he saw. Or, what he thought he saw. So when the cops didn't turn the driver up, Montoya went out looking himself."

Hexalt rubbed the side of his face but kept his eyes on me.

"And that's what brought him out here to Coronado," I told him. "All Sunday Montoya searched, and he must have checked all the parking lots and driveways around here, looking for it."

Hexalt's frown sharpened a bit, but he still said nothing.

"And he must have been in terrible pain the whole time—but I suppose that's what best friends do for one another, right, sir?"

He looked disbelieving. His forehead frowned, his mouth smirked, but he didn't ask any questions.

"And," I added, "he did find it."

I lit another cigarette. "You see, sir, what Montoya saw, and what he meant to say, was that a truck with a navy base decal on the bumper had run his friend down. A civilian truck driven by a navy man. That's what he saw, and tried to explain, but it got twisted around."

"Fascinating," Hexalt said in an unfascinated way.

I shrugged. "Just another one of those things that happen, sir."

"Hmmm."

"And, of course," I repeated, "he found it."

He nodded, because I was no longer surprising him.

"In your driveway, sir," I added.

Hexalt shook his head once.

"Now, I'm just guessing at all this, of course . . ."

"Tell me about it!" he blurted with a laugh.

"But," I went on, smiling myself, "what I think happened was that you saw him outside. Perhaps looking at the truck, and you either recognized him as a witness to what you'd done earlier that week, or you suspected he was."

"Of course, I don't know what was going through your mind then. You'd already panicked once that week, after running over Tiexiera in your truck, so your thinking couldn't have been too rational at that point. But you were afraid, and you saw Montoya as a threat."

"Really?"

I nodded. "You saw him go around and ring the front gate of Captain Grumman's house. He'd found you, and I guess he'd decided to call the police, so he went next door to use the phone, and he rang Grumman's bell—and you buzzed him inside the fence."

Hexalt finished his beer and licked his lips.

"You had that remote of yours that controlled his entrance. You showed it to me. You were the only one home at the time who could have let him in."

He swallowed.

"You let Montoya walk right through, and into the dogs."

A muscle in his cheek twitched.

"And you knew exactly what they'd do to him, didn't you, sir?" I added. "You told me."

For a couple of minutes, then, Hexalt said nothing, but his eyes were alive with thought. Finally one thought made him frown and look up at me. "Just a minute," he said,

leaning forward. "Are there any witnesses? Living witnesses, I mean?"

"No, sir."

He grinned and held his hands up. "Then, why are we talking?"

I grinned back at him. "Like I said, sir. It had been bothering me, and I thought you could fill the story in for me."

He laughed. "Really, Mr. Virginiak."

I gestured toward the front of his house and the driveway. "The tires on your truck are a match for the imprints you left on the body of James Tiexiera."

He shook his head rather patronizingly. "There's nothing special about those tires, Mr. Virginiak. You'll find them on small trucks everywhere—and don't tell me you found any blood or anything on those tires that links me with the death of this Tiexiera person, because they're clean."

"You cleaned them?"

He sighed and got to his feet. "Mr. Virginiak, I'm tired . . ."

"You might be surprised, sir, at what a good forensic pathologist can do with apparently clean surfaces . . ."

"That should take a warrant, wouldn't it, Mr. Virginiak?"

"Yes, sir."

He smiled. "A warrant issued upon probable cause?"

I nodded.

He nodded back. "Well," he said with calm certainty, "your overactive imagination aside, there is no probable cause."

I stared at him.

And for a moment he only stood there staring back at me.

Finally he grinned broadly. "Now, as I said, Mr. Virginiak, I'm tired—and I'm going to bed." He waved a finger at me. "And I don't want to hear of you making any wild accusations about me to anyone else. You've no witnesses and no evidence—and I've killed *no* one, so . . ."

"Sir!" I said, smiling up at him. "You killed James Tiexiera, and probably murdered Joseph Montoya, and I've already spoken with the police about you."

His own smile froze. "Have you."

I nodded. "Yes, sir," I said, then got up and walked to his front window and looked out into the dark street. "I called them from the captain's house just a few minutes ago. They should be here—with a warrant—shortly."

Hexalt kept standing for a moment, with more thoughts running behind his eyes. "I don't . . ." His frown sharpened. "I was nowhere near Chelsea Street that night," he told me

in a voice that didn't even believe itself. "I was . . ."

"You were there," and pointed to the roof. "That satellite dish you put up the other day?"

His eyes flicked up and down.

"You'd had it on order for several months. The manager at Pacific Coast TV and Appliance remembers you. He helped you carry it out to your truck."

Hexalt's intense frown collapsed.

"He even remembers telling you to be careful driving because the dish blocked your vision in the back."

His eyes closed.

"You were parked in that same parking structure where Tiexiera was run over," I told him. "Around five P.M. a week ago last Friday night."

The lieutenant said nothing.

The buzzer to the front gate of Hexalt's house hummed suddenly like a giant angry bee, but the man made no move. The security remote was on the coffee table, so I picked it up and beeped the police in. I then went and stood by the front door as they came up the walkway.

"By the way," I told Hexalt as I opened the door, "if you need a good lawyer, I think I know one."

UNSOLVED

by Guy Savant

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the November issue.

Due to a major leak in the Federal Witness Relocation Program, seven men whose testimony was invaluable in the convictions of top major crime bosses have had their new identities revealed. Also learned via this leak was the job each man held in the "family" and the city to which each was relocated, one of them being San Antonio. A former courier was found in Wichita and a banker who laundered money was found in Salt Lake City, much to their chagrin.

From the clues provided by the leak, can you figure out the former name of each man, his new name, what he used to do in the underworld, and the city in which he currently resides?

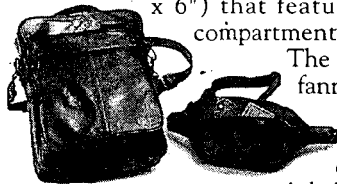
1. Bliss was never named Norris, Thomas, or Oscar and was not relocated to Wichita, Salt Lake City, or St. Paul.
2. Ronald, who was not an accountant, a banker, or a lawyer in his former life, was never named Norris, Carl, or Wayne (who was relocated to Portland).
3. Ivan, who did not live in Boise, Seattle, or Portland, was never an accountant, a courier, or a chemist for the underworld.
4. Adam, who lived in either St. Paul or Wichita, was either a pilot or a lawyer and was never named Oscar, Wayne, or Thomas (who was not a banker).
5. Neville, who lived in the southernmost city of all those in the witness program, was not the hit man, courier, or accountant, and was never called Oscar, Norris, or Thomas.
6. Carl was either the chemist or the accountant, but was not renamed Norton, Bliss, or Edgar.
7. Ollie used to be a hit man, a banker, or a courier before he was renamed Adam, Norton, or Edgar and was relocated to Portland, Seattle, or Boise.
8. Xavier, who was relocated to either Seattle or Portland, was not renamed Bliss, Ronald, or Norton and was never an accountant, a banker, or a lawyer.

See page 132 for the solution to the September puzzle.

MAIL ORDER MALL

LEATHER LUGGAGE

Do you love the look of exquisite leather but hate the price tag? If so, this incredible offer is perfect for you. Read on for the details of these four handsome pieces of top grain genuine black leather. First, there is a stunning yet totally functional canvas lined carry-on. Compact (18" x 6" x 15") and lightweight yet spacious, this sleek carry-on features seven exterior compartments and two roomy interior pockets. Durable construction, a double handle with grips and adjustable, detachable shoulder strap make this the perfect luggage piece for any trip. Second, hand-some detailing and sturdy construction make our Knapsack second to none. It measures (12" x 5.5" x 15") and the roomy main compartment closes with a draw string and buckle flap while three extra pockets offer plenty of extra room. Brass rivets and double stitching reinforce stress point areas. So functional yet so good looking—this knapsack is in a class by itself. Third, there is a tailored black leather men's shoulder bag that makes a classic fashion statement. The sleek design is a perfect size (9.5" x 12" x 3") and features a spacious zippered main compartment with 1 inside and 2 outside zippered pockets. The adjustable shoulder strap is detachable, and the bag can be carried by its sturdy grip handle. Lastly, there is a deluxe black leather zippered fanny pack (10" x 3.5" x 6") that features both an extra zippered outside compartment and a hidden zippered back pocket.



The adjustable leather waist belt make this fanny pack both comfortable to wear and attractive to look at. So there you have it—4 exquisite and superbly crafted leather pieces at prices that you won't believe. Carry-On Piece—\$124.98 (\$7.95)

#A2019 Knapsack—\$59.98 (\$5.95) #A2020 Man's Shoulder Bag—\$59.98 (\$5.95) #A2018 Fanny Pack—\$22.98 (\$4.25) #A2017

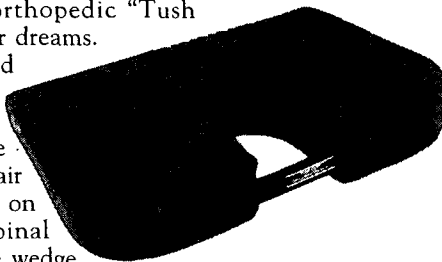
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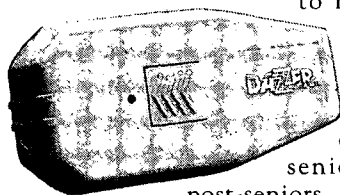
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shape tips the pelvis forward to help restore the spine's natural lumbar curve. Constructed of highly resilient polyurethane foam, the "Tush Cush" comes with a removable, machine washable, dark brown cover. It measures 14"x18" and features a handle for easy toting. Perfect for home, office, auto, sporting events, theaters, wheel chairs-or anywhere your "tush" needs a "cush"ion! \$39.98 (\$5.75) #A1967



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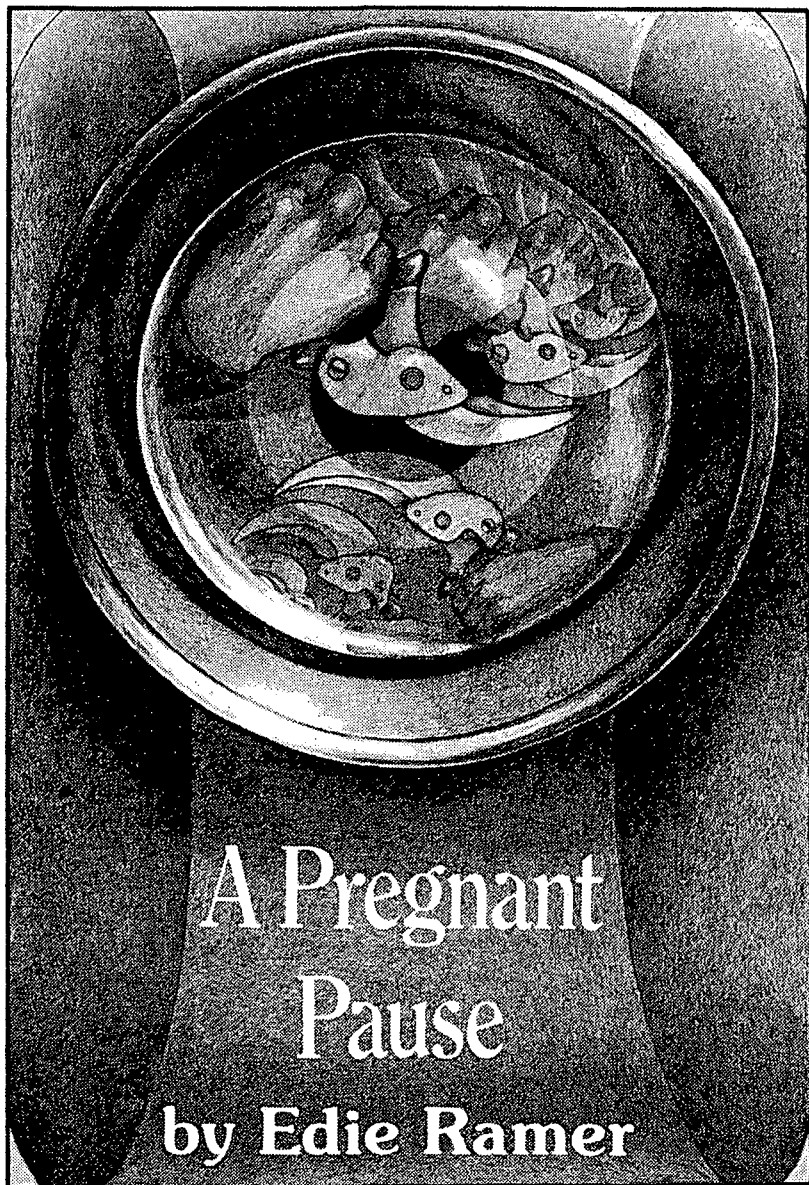
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FICTION



A Pregnant
Pause
by Edie Ramer

Illustration by Judy Mitchell

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When your stomach resembles the Goodyear blimp, your husband's deserted you, and it's August in a Florida suburb, there's not much else to do but let the heat seep into your enlarged pores and watch, little mother, watch. You watch your neighbors in the condominium where you live: the barbecuers, the lovers, the fighters, and the man with the camcorder. Because you're a cop—and because the dark side of life is as close as your shadow—you are not surprised when the man with the camcorder is found in his living room with a garden implement embedded in his chest.

After all, you thought of killing the son of a bitch yourself.

Dusk had fallen, giving the world an eerie half-light. The mosquitoes had driven me indoors, into my air-conditioned two bedroom with dining room apartment that carried Paul's memory in every chair, picture, and corner. I sat in silence, the TV off and no radio songs echoing my pain. I'd tried to train my mind into blankness—and sometimes it had even worked. But I couldn't escape the scream that had haunted my nightmares for the last six weeks.

Only I was awake. And the scream that split the air and silenced the crickets hadn't come from inside my head. The soul-wrenching cry was real, not a manifestation of my pain. This time.

While I was struggling out of the rattan chair, someone pounded on my patio doors. The scream stopped. I plodded to the glassed-in enclosure, pulling aside the drapes I had taken to closing two days after Judson Sharp had bought his camcorder.

"You have to come, Kallie." My next door neighbor stood outside my windows, her arms around her shivering model's body. "The Judhead's dead."

My muscles relaxed. I smiled.

Angela's pupils distended. "No! It's not a natural death. Someone killed him. Stuck a pruning shears through his heart."

"Probably looking for a weed," I said. But I slid open the glass door. "Did anyone call the cops?"

"Nine-one-one. Come on, hurry."

"What for? If he's dead, he's not going anywhere. Judson Sharp's shot his last illicit video."

She stopped on the stone walkway, slim and perfect next to the dwarf Japanese tree under my bathroom window and my own distended stomach. "Don't you see? Don't you get it? They'll think one of us did it."

The whine of a siren stopped the crickets' song once again. In the saunalike air I shivered. Chattering came from the opposite side of the pool. The neighbors were gathered outside the Sharps' patio doors the way they used to gather inside to watch the dark secrets of other peoples' lives on Judson's fifty-four-inch TV screen. Now they were trying to see the darkest secret of all—death.

I turned back to my living room. I wanted to throw up. "The police will call if they want us."

Angela grabbed my upper arm. "You think those ghouls won't tell the cops who wanted Judhead dead? They'll talk faster than they'll jump in bed with their own husbands and wives."

"Twice as fast," I said, and I stepped into my living room, locked the door, and pulled the drapes shut.

She knocked on the glass for a moment before giving up and going away. I sat in the growing darkness thinking back to the Sunday afternoon when Paul's old girlfriend came with an early baby present and walked out with Paul. I'd stumbled after them, pleading for Paul to stay. Caught up in my misery, I hadn't noticed Judson and the camcorder he carried with him as if it were an obscene part of his anatomy. I'd found out what he'd done the next Friday when I sat in his living room, trying to fill the silence of Paul's leaving with my neighbors' laughter. They'd laughed softly that night, tittering with their hands over their mouths. But when I told Judson that he was a dead man, they'd laughed out loud.

Judson had laughed loudest. He wasn't laughing now.

It took them three hours to get to me. I recognized Detective Elaine Laster from a couple of banquets and cop funerals. I'd probably seen her partner, Jim Aldorez, around, too, but when you're one of a few, it's the other few you notice. Of course, that was when I gave a damn.

Laster's eyes were the same color as the pale blue couch she sat on and just as inscrutable. Her square face was set like a hanging judge's. No sympathy there. Good. Pity was the last thing I wanted. Aldorez should've taken lessons from her. His dark eyes were too warm and human for him to have gotten where he was. He was the one to be on guard against.

"You knew the decedent?" Laster asked.

I nodded.

"You had a grudge against him."

It wasn't a question, but I answered anyway. "People kill in the

heat of anger. I wouldn't've waited six weeks to kill Sharp. What he did doesn't even bother me any more."

"I don't believe you," she said.

Aldorez, on the opposite end of the couch, rolled his eyes. "Damnit, Elaine. She's one of us."

Laster's mouth tightened. "Since when have cops been issued wings and halos? Besides, she's on leave now."

"A cop is a cop. We don't beat up on our own kind."

I leaned back in the cushioned rattan chair. The baby was kicking as if he wanted to be the one out here solving the case. I put my hands on my stomach. Not my baby; my baby was going to be a doctor, a scientist, anything but a cop.

"She's right and you know it," Aldorez was saying.

"Six weeks is a long time, especially to a pregnant woman."

"Since when did you become the expert on pregnant women? How do you know she hasn't spent the last month and a half brooding about Sharp?"

Aldorez made a sweeping motion toward me. "Will you just look at her? Cop or not, she's in no shape to kill anyone. The baby's going to pop out any second now."

Laster's pale blue eyes zeroed in on my stomach, the size of a beached whale. Then she turned her pale blue eyes to her partner. "What do you propose to do? Ask for her help?"

"Why not? She knows everyone here."

I struggled to sit upright. "You sure it was someone from the complex?"

"The odds say so." Aldorez leaned toward me. "The pruning shears came from the shed in the back. Your friend liked to film his neighbors in embarrassing positions, and according to his wife, three films are missing. Why don't you tell us what you know? What kind of a guy was Judson Sharp?"

"The kind who has to be the center of attention." I frowned. "He's always got extra beer for pool parties. He wears Hawaiian shirts and neon shorts. He keeps a film of his baby's birth in a wood-grained container on top of his TV, showing it to anyone who drops in."

Laster's nostrils flared. "If he were my husband, he'd be wearing the film around his neck. Who else did he film besides you and his wife?"

I looked at her, my eyes narrowed. If she didn't know the identity of Sharp's other two victims, I was a sixteen-year-old virgin.

"Why don't you tell me?" I said.

Aldorez laughed.

Laster glared at him, and he shrugged. "It's been a long day," he said.

"It's not getting any shorter." She stood abruptly. "The boys should be done. Let's go to the scene of the crime. Maybe our colleague will see something we missed."

"Like what?" Aldorez took his time stretching to his six foot length. "We already know the videos he took of Kallie and the other two are gone."

She turned on him with a snarl. "It was your idea to have her help us."

"Why don't you lighten up?"

"This isn't a comedy club, you fool, it's a murder investigation."

Their wrangling gave me time to struggle out of the chair. It also gave me time to realize I was watching either the worst match possible—or two people in love. They were lucky Sharp wasn't around to catch them with his camcorder. A lot of people were lucky Sharp wasn't around.

On our trek around the lighted pool, I shook off Aldorez's hand from my elbow. Stars twinkled in the moonless sky. Faces gleamed whitely from my neighbors' patio doors, watching us despite the late hour. I could feel their curiosity, their avidity, wanting some drama to fill the holes in their empty lives. They'd watched Judson's films for the same reason. I should've felt sorry for them, but I despised them instead.

The Sharps' living room seemed alien with the TV screen blank. A man's shape was drawn on the tan carpet, a splotch of rusty-red just outside the chalk line. The room reeked of death, though I knew it was my imagination. I slipped my arms around my belly, a long slip.

"What do you see?" Laster asked.

I saw the glass-enclosed bookcases that held the labeled videos. I saw the furniture arranged to face the fifty-four-inch TV. I saw the fake wood cabinet gleaming, with the VCR and the photos of Phyllis and the baby on top looking as if something were missing.

In Phyllis's photo, she had the tired look on her face that I'd seen on partners of drug addicts. After Judson had televised my pain to two dozen neighbors, Phyllis had tried to apologize to me. She'd probably tried to apologize to Angela after Sharp ruined Angela's marriage by filming her in the Jacuzzi with the pool man. And to

Judge Dreyfus after Sharp filmed him meeting secretly with a businessman whose case the judge was presiding over.

"Angela Paisley was on a shoot at Miami Beach today," Aldorez said. "Judge Dreyfus was at the D.A.'s talking about—" he coughed—"business. You're the only one left here. If you didn't do it, then who did?"

"He could've filmed someone else in the past few days."

Laster shook her head. "His camcorder was stolen last Tuesday. He had a new one on order."

"If you did kill him, I certainly don't blame you," Aldorez said.

Now I knew why they'd brought me here. They needed my help like I needed to have triplets. It was the sympathy gambit. No good cop, bad cop; just two good cops who would do all they could to help me. After all, I was one of them. Now was the time for me to confess.

Laster moved closer to me. "Even his wife said she won't blame you. The poor woman's pregnant again and said she understands how you feel."

Aldorez stepped to my other side. "You're one of us. We'll make sure it goes easy on you."

"Your pregnancy's gotten to you," said Laster.

"You can find a dozen doctors to testify to that." Aldorez put his arm around my shoulder. "I can even give you a few names myself."

I pulled away from them. "Where's Phyllis?"

"Sharp's wife?" Aldorez frowned. "She and the kid are staying next door for the night. I'm sorry, Kallie, I know the wife's usually the first suspect, but she's got no motive. The husband wasn't insured. No one heard them fighting. There's no evidence of any affair. It just won't fly."

"I want to talk to her." I crossed my arms over my chest.

Laster and Aldorez exchanged a look. Laster shrugged. Aldorez nodded and went toward the patio doors. Laster leaned against the TV. We waited in silence. My lower back began to ache, a pounding that reminded me of a toothache.

Phyllis stepped through the patio doors ahead of Aldorez. She wore jeans and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Her eyes were haunted, and her face was drawn. But she'd been that way for the last year—since she'd had her baby.

"When did you find out you were pregnant?" I asked.

She blinked at me.

"We can call your doctor and find out," I said.

"Last Monday." She seemed to shrink, keeping her eyes from the TV screen.

"That was the day before the camcorder was stolen."

Laster came to attention. Aldorez's brown eyes began to gleam.

"Why didn't you just tell Judson not to film the birth?" I asked. "You didn't have to kill him."

"He promised me the first time he wouldn't film it." She shook her head like a weary Madonna. "I just couldn't trust him. You know?"

"Yes, I know." Paul had promised me it was over between him and Lorraine before we were engaged, before we were married, and before I became pregnant. Yes, I knew what promises were worth.

Laster read Phyllis her rights. Aldorez cuffed her and took her next door to ask if the neighbors would take care of her son. Laster stayed to talk to me.

"What made you guess?" she asked. "Was it what Jim and I said about pregnant women going blooey? That was a bunch of moonshine, you know. We just made it up to trap you."

Laughing hurt my back. I shook my head. "It was the missing films. You said there were three, but there's four gone."

She frowned. "The jerk catalogued his films, can you believe it? We matched them film for film against his list."

"Except for Ashley's birth." I nodded at the top of the TV. "That video he kept next to the VCR. It was his favorite. Probably never listed it."

"Jim and I get all the nuts. At least this one's better than the mother killing her daughter for wearing a miniskirt. You'd better come down to the station with us."

I nodded and went to the car with them. But I never made it to the station. They had to take a detour to the hospital. Two hours later, my son was born.

The baby's three months old now. I'm back at work, but tomorrow I'm taking time off to testify in Phyllis's behalf. Laster laughed when I told her. Oddly, Aldorez was the one who grew angry. As Laster said, he'd never had a baby. If someone had been filming me giving birth, I would've reared off the table and strangled him.

I guess Phyllis could have divorced Judson. But the bastard might still have sneaked into the delivery room with his camcorder. Really, Phyllis did the right thing, and that's just what I'm going to tell the jury.

Painkiller

by Jesse Slattery

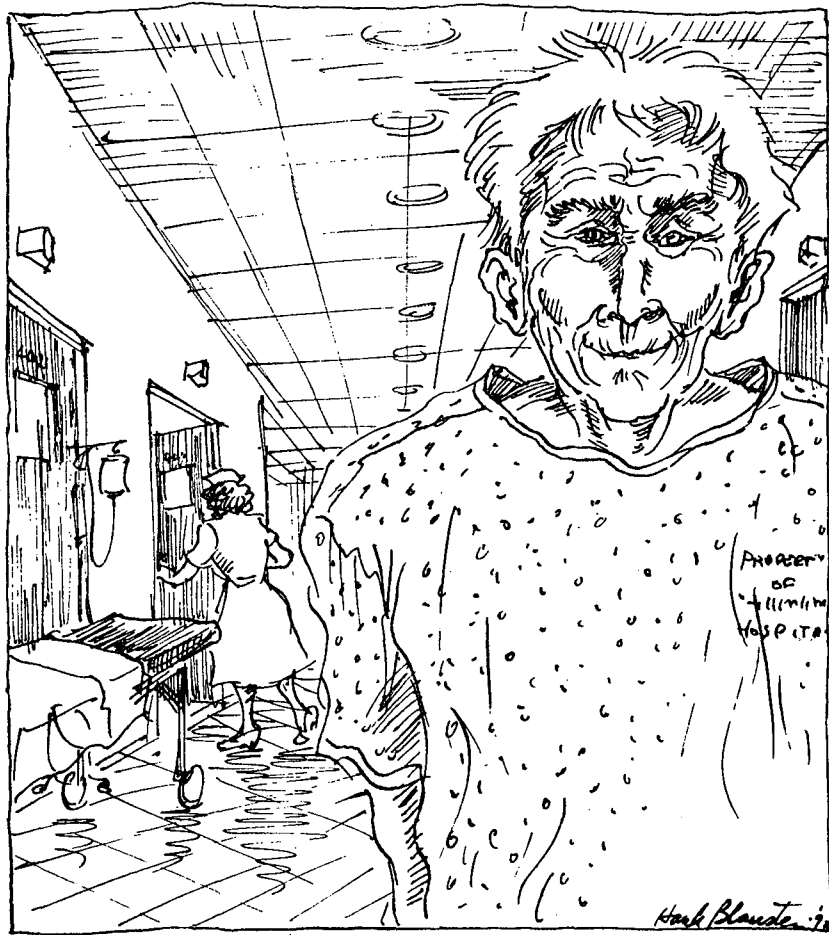


Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Nurse Laurie Schroeder's right hand rose in small jerks as if it were surprising itself, each movement bringing the middle knuckle of its middle finger inexorably closer to the tip of her nose.

"You've had that knuckle all your life," said a soothing, pleasant, seemingly never-ending voice beside her, "but I'll bet you've never really taken the time to study that knuckle. And that is your job, your only job, the only thing I want you to do.

"As you look at that knuckle you'll see lines that meet, lines that intersect, lines that dead end. Even after you think you've seen all there is to see about that knuckle, every once in a while you'll see something new. It may be a difference in color between the knuckle and the rest of the finger, it might be a difference in texture ... and each time you see something different, your hand will become lighter, the hand will rise more and more into the air, and the knuckle will come closer to your nose. ..."

"Nurse!"

The shout and the howl of anguish following it jolted Laurie Schroeder upright; it also caused Hartley McVey a painful spasm at the site of his incision.

"I'm sorry," she said to Hart-

ley. He gingerly swung his legs and feet back into his hospital bed and waved away her apology.

"You're a terrific subject, Laurie," he said. "No harm done, and don't worry about a thing. I'll certainly be here for awhile. We'll have another chance. Maybe later, after you take care of Mr. Harris."

"Right," she said and twisted her upper lip into a face that spoke volumes. Three times Hartley had tried to hypnotize her, and all three times Abbott Harris, two rooms away, had broken the spell. It was not a matter of bad timing. Any time would have been bad simply because Abbott Harris seemed never to shut up. "I'll be back when you get your Tens unit anyway," Nurse Schroeder said as she left.

He'd almost forgotten. Today, six days after surgery, his doctors had ordered the Tens unit. If it worked, blocking pain signals going to his brain with little measured jolts of its own electricity, he might be able to reduce his use of pain medication. Hartley looked forward to trying it. Even if it didn't work, it was a gadget, and Hartley loved gadgets.

"Oh my God, for the love of God, please, Nurse!"

Ghengis Khan would have melted, Hartley thought. And

thinking of that led him to thinking about Fernandez across the hall. Fernandez was a transfer from One-North, the hospital's psychiatric ward. He'd somehow developed pneumonia; hospital policy dictated that mental patients had to be moved to general med/surg wards for treatment of such disorders; when cured, they were returned to One-North. In the meantime, they brought a little of One-North with them.

Fernandez, a curly-haired man in his mid-thirties, was restrained, his ankles strapped to his bed as well as his wrists. Yet somehow he managed to lever his torso up and yell at Napoleon at the foot of the bed. Sometimes. He did not limit himself in choice of audience: many nights he ranted at Ghengis. He did all this shade-talking a shade louder than even Harris yelled (which Hartley could at least accept on the premise that loud was understandable: Fernandez' listeners were very dead).

He looked over at Willie in the next bed. Finally he was asleep or seemed to be, and Hartley breathed as deeply as his staples allowed. He liked Willie, but Willie could be tiring. Straight out of a Dannon yogurt commercial, Willie was a ninety-three-year-old Georgian who could pace for hours

while, in barely decipherable English, so vividly relive his middle-aged World War II exploits behind German lines that he snared listeners into rapt attention—and then suddenly and limberly drop into a near lotus position while he explained the philosophy behind execution. Hartley was awed by the old man and unabashedly envious. Willie was in for a tuneup, as he put it, to put his sixty-three-year-old son's mind to rest by proving he didn't have anything wrong with him.

Hartley had just had his gallbladder removed. What was so annoying was Willie's inability to understand how anything could go wrong in only forty-five years. He had a one-hundred-twenty-two-year-old uncle, he said, and Hartley believed him. He also said his uncle still had his gallbladder, and Hartley believed that, too.

"Oh God, nurse, oh, please . . ." Harris plaintively wailed, his plea penetrating the entire east wing. As usual, several visitors had left the rooms of those they'd come to visit and begun to file by Hartley's door to gather outside Harris's room; they were the uninitiated. Those who had on an earlier occasion raced to see if they could help the poor man so obviously being mistreated by the staff no longer bothered.

"God . . ." the outcry muted abruptly.

Nurse Schroeder had arrived.

Hartley looked at his watch. It wasn't time for Harris's pain shot yet, so Hartley figured he either wanted his pillow fluffed or had run out of ice water.

"He noisy," Willie observed, still lying on his side, his eyes closed. Hartley wondered if Willie really had been asleep at all. Or if he ever slept.

"He is that, Willie. I doubt Mr. Belski ever in his life thought he'd be lucky to be in a coma." Belski was Harris's roommate; theirs was one of the more perfect matches made by Angel of Mercy administration.

"Mr. Harris is lonely," Willie said.

"Aren't we all."

"No," Willie said. He'd accepted Hartley's statement as a question. "Most have somebody, even an enemy. He has no time to make friends, so he makes enemies. Easier."

"Maybe if I get to be your age I'll be as smart as you," Hartley said, meaning it.

"You won't get to be my age."

A spasm raced through Hartley's abdomen; Willie, of course, was right, Hartley thought, but he asked anyway: "Why not?"

"Because you keep saying

'maybe,' " Willie answered and, his eyes still closed, grinned broadly.

"I tell people things like that, Willie. I make my living telling people things like that. It doesn't mean I have to believe them."

"People pay you to put them to sleep, yes?"

"Well, that's part of it. I also sell them crystals to help them meditate and tap into their higher levels of self-awareness. We're living in a remarkable age of discovery, Willie, discovery of inner truths."

Willie emitted a high nonagenarian giggle.

"You think you're a pretty good crook, huh? Thief."

"I'm not a thief, Willie. I resent that. There are many more forces at work around us than you can measure with yardsticks and clocks. At your age, you should know that."

"At my age I do know that."

"Well, then, even if the sciences of cards and crystals and meditation are still a little crude, it doesn't mean people can't benefit from them. My clients find . . . peace of mind. That's not crooked, and I'm not a thief."

"Do you believe in . . ." Willie just waved his right hand in circles.

"What I believe—or don't—doesn't matter. If they think

a rock will solve their problems and their problems are solved, who cares about the rock?"

"You are right. Total right," Willie said. "That's your problem."

"Now, what the hell does that mean?"

"It means that you are right. You have troubles with English? How many meanings do you get out of that? You are right. To be at peace is a wonderful thing—the only big thing. To make people be at peace is very good . . . very honorable. The rocks and the words, they don't matter; you are right, but you don't believe you are right. You really believe you are a thief."

Hartley sighed. It wasn't time for a shot or a pill or even a meal—anything that would break up the day. And save him from listening to Willie, which became increasingly taxing as the days passed, especially when Willie was right or even stood a chance of being right.

A meal, of course, would have been ideal; nothing would distract Willie from food. But, as dinner was still some time away, and Willie was his normally tireless self, Hartley braced for more spotty but damnably sharp jabs at himself and his past.

Hartley had what he described as a "flexible" past, and

if his expressions of contentment sometimes were a little forced—and he knew himself well enough indeed to recognize when they were—he considered himself reasonably happy.

For the most part. He wasn't getting shot at—which had happened to him more often in his eight years as a reporter than in his four as a New York City cop—and he was offering peace of mind to some very well-financed clients. Flexible, but certainly not at all shabby.

There had, of course, been a time he'd really believed he could "make a difference." Gradually, though, the mileage had built up on Hartley. Husbands beating wives who'd gladly stab the cop who tried to stop them, loonies sniping at strangers, streams of dead kids or dead cabbies interspersed with jewelers robbing themselves for the insurance.

One very tired, very rainy night, on the curving driveway of the Jacob Javits Convention Center, as he stared into the trunk of an abandoned car trying to figure out how many people were entangled in the bloody mess inside, he'd realized the whole damned universe was orchestrated, that all these things were factored into the mechanism, and that as a cop he was no more than

just one extra moving part.

Three, he'd figured. Definitely six hands and only three with watches.

It was his first epiphany. He was not meant to fix things, to make them right. He was meant to do exactly what he was doing because part of the Grand Scheme called for three dead people with six hands and three watches to be in a car trunk, and another part of The Plan said there had to be somebody around to count them. He was not meant to fix things because they weren't broken.

And in a world where everything is as it should be, what can you do to bitch about it?

You write about it.

And so he'd done that, mostly as a stringer. Until the night he and a photographer friend had entered a Chelsea tenement's foyer, sniffed the air, and said in unison: "Dead person here."

It had been the second—and he hoped final—epiphany. He'd decided that when a man could tell by smell the difference between a dead person and a dead cat, it was time to move on.

But to where?

Glory had provided the answer; Glory was a real estate broker specializing in Manhattan condos. Her unique service: crystals told her if the apartments' vibes matched the pro-

spective buyers' vibes. And when they didn't, in addition to offering fire insurance, the Glory Road Real Estate Agency offered exorcisms that brought everything into harmony. She and Hartley made love to banal New Age music. They cooked healthy foods to banal New Age music. And Hartley had watched, laughed, and watched some more as the money poured in. Then he'd stopped laughing and figured it was just the sort of career move he needed.

And so was born Golden Grail Associates.

Hartley, with the help of a lot of research and the inspiration of a prudish nude dancer named Daffy—short for Daffodil—who'd somehow replaced Glory in his bedroom, became the New Age wizard of the Upper East Side. He taroted 'em, hypnotized 'em, and crystalized 'em. And they loved it to well into six figures a year. And that gave him enough cushion to take a vacation whenever his clients were too happy with him and he was in danger of taking himself seriously.

A problem he never would face with Willie, he thought, whose ninety-three years made him too damned shrewd.

"Nurse Laurie, she wants to lose weight, right," Willie more stated than asked, bringing

Hartley back to his bland beige room, his IV tubes, his now disconnected but ready and waiting naso-gastric tube and drain that dumped greenish black gunk from his insides to a plastic bag dangling from the bed.

"Yeah. About twenty pounds. She'll look terrific."

"And with this knuckle thing you can talk her into losing weight, right?"

"Something like that."

"Then you're not a thief."

"Of course I'm not a thief. I told you I'm not a thief. For one thing, hypnotism is certifiably legitimate. And I'm not even charging her."

Willie cackled. "Sure you charging her. Your belly hurts, you get your medicine quick, right? You get it quicker than Mr. Harris, right? Everybody charge everybody," he said and lapsed into deeper laughter.

Hartley rolled more onto his left side, holding his breath to allow his freshly disturbed innards to settle. He wished he could take a nap. He wished the three-fifty-a-day television had cable. He'd have settled for an orderly with a wheelchair cruising in to tell him he had a date with an X-ray. Anything that would break up the monotony of the hospital day. And shut up Willie.

An attractive brunette breezed into the room carrying

a small plastic case in one hand and a clipboard in the other.

"Mr. McVey?" she called, and Hartley raised his hand. The brunette bounced over. Hartley didn't miss the appreciative look she got from Willie. "I'm Jeannette from physical therapy," she said. "I've got your Tens here."

Hartley sat up quickly. "Good. I've been looking forward to this."

"You want to avoid drugs? People are becoming very responsible about avoiding drugs." The shape of her neck made him want to respond to the approval in her voice, but he wasn't in the mood for a scam.

"Not really, Jeannette. My doctor recommended it, and I'm curious. Personally, I think that choosing to hurt when you don't have to means your problems aren't limited to your gallbladder. I'll take medication, electrocution, or a sharp tap behind my left ear if it will get rid of the pain."

"Oh." Her disappointment at least skittered like a cirrus cloud across a bright sun, to be quickly gone. "You'll find it reduces your drug dependence anyway."

"Wonderful. How's it work?"

"It's really simple," she said, opening the plastic case. She took out a cigarette pack-sized

box with three knobs and a bundle of floppy rubberized discs dangling from wires. She plugged the wires' other ends into the device. "The Tens sends out rapid electrical signals. We think they block pain signals; we're not completely sure. They may also stimulate the release of endorphins—those are the body's own painkilling drugs."

"So nature beat Schering-Plough, huh?"

"This goes here..." she went on without responding. She dripped a sticky goo from a tube onto his abdomen and firmly pressed down an electrode. "And this one here..." again some goo, with this pad being placed on the opposite side of the incision. "Now, tell me when you feel something." She began to turn knobs.

Nothing... twist... nothing... twist... "Yipes!"

"Whoops. Sorry. That's a little too much."

Hartley swallowed and nodded agreement; the muscle between the electrodes had twitched violently—and hurt.

"Just how much juice has that thing got?"

"Oh, don't let its size fool you. It can deliver a lot bigger shot than that."

"Great."

"Now I want you to turn these knobs. This one controls

the intensity, and this one sets the width of the pulse. Changing that gives you the feeling of changing the depth of the sensation. Play. Go ahead."

Hartley did and in a short time was beginning to enjoy fiddling with the thing. He settled on a particularly warm and soothing setting.

"How's that feel?"

"Very pleasant."

"And how's the abdominal pain?"

Hartley felt his eyes widen. The damned thing worked. The lingering pain that even drugs couldn't abolish was gone. "It's gone," he said.

Jeannette absolutely glowed. "Sometimes you get used to a setting, so you may have to adjust it once in awhile. And you'll probably need medication at some point—but less frequently. Otherwise, that's it."

Hartley continued to play with his new toy. Only then did he notice that Willie had been totally absorbed by the demonstration to the point he'd not said a word.

"This could be a very useful thing, Willie."

"Is nothing new. The Germans once put wires on my balls and cranked up a field telephone."

"Oh, I'll bet that really got rid of the pain."

"Sure did. Hurt so damned much I passed out. Felt nothing."

"Well, I assure you this is totally different," said the physical therapist. Hartley noticed she was wide-eyed and simultaneously blushing as she told Willie, "The Tens is basically harmless..." Those words coursed through Hartley like a saline flush.

"What's this 'basically' stuff? Is this thing dangerous?"

"No, not when you use it like I told you. So just use it that way, okay?"

"Okay."

"Could it hurt somebody's balls?" Willie asked.

Her mouth opened and closed a few times, then she turned to Hartley and said, "There's an extra nine-volt battery in the case."

And that seemed to conclude Hartley's introduction to the Tens. It was really very comforting, he thought. A pleasant, warm feeling spread over his abdomen.

Then it was finally Willie's favorite time of day. At least one of them. Dinner was beef vegetable soup, turkey breast and candied sweet potatoes, green beans, bread, butter, chilled peach halves.

Hartley liked the hospital's food, found himself in a minority, and attributed that to the

other patients' lack of experience. Cops and reporters lost their taste buds long before their livers.

Willie absolutely loved the hospital food and told Hartley that the cops and reporters should have been in eastern Europe in the early forties. Food often figured into Willie's reminiscences, and while Hartley frequently became engrossed in the old man's stories, he was fascinated mostly with Willie's reactions to the horrors he'd seen—and to some he'd inflicted. Willie, Hartley had finally concluded, had been through flames that scarred the psyche, and unlike some men who stop there, destined to wear those scars, Willie had gone on through flames that had scoured him clean again. Clean, but changed. Massive suffering had given Willie rare perspective.

"When you kill a man," Willie had once advised him, the advice being unsolicited, "you must kill quickly and cleanly. No matter who he is. Even if he is butcher who should burn in hell. Hate does not belong with killing. You kill quick and you kill clean—not for the man but because death deserves that dignity."

When Willie said it, Hartley heard "death" with a capital "D."

Much like Dinner.

"Nurse!" one . . . two . . . three
... "Nurse!" one . . . two . . . three
... "Nurse!"

Whatever problem Laurie Schroeder had handled earlier had been supplanted by another.

The shouting went on and on. Hartley felt his own stomach contract with frustrating anger. Harris had in record time alienated every patient and staff member on the floor.

Then, from across the hall: "Waterloo! Stay away! Waterloo!"

Hartley cringed. It was still daylight; Fernandez wasn't scheduled to start lecturing Napoleon for hours. Willie giggled; Fernandez didn't bother Willie. Hartley suspected Willie understood his disjointed ravings.

Voices penetrated the walls. Those directed at God and Nurse Schroeder dropped in volume; those meant for the ears of long dead generals rose. Hartley looked at his watch. Six forty-five. All he asked was a half-hour break for *Jeopardy*. He'd never get it, he thought.

"Some day they're going to poison him to shut him up," Hartley said. "A fast-acting poison," he hastened to add.

"Silly silly and you a policeman. Too easy to find."

"Not if the person who did it is the person who decides what to look for."

"You have good police here, Hartley. They know to look closest at people who make decisions. You know this."

"And how would you do it? You can't icepick him in his ear in a hospital bed."

"I don't think of things like that now; I must eat."

Nurse Schroeder came in.

"Dinner all right?" she asked.

"This is lovely," Willie said. "Beans very good, turkey too."

Nurse Schroeder looked doubtful and glanced at Hartley.

"He means that for canned beans these probably were canned better than any other beans ever and that for dry turkey there is no tastier dry turkey. That about right, Willie?"

"Very right. Same for canned peaches."

"It sounds like this is starting to make sense to you, too," she said to Hartley.

"Actually, it is. You could get used to it."

"Oh, sure," she said, widened her eyes, and threw up her hands, "that's just what I need. The ability to eat anything and enjoy it. You're supposed to help me lose weight."

"Good point. Want to give it another try later?"

"Maybe tomorrow. Or maybe the next day. I'll be filling in on the overnight then. Does Harris sleep?"

"For at least twenty minutes at a time."

"Lovely." She turned her head toward Willie. "We can send you in there, Willie, and you can give him your lecture on enjoying dry turkey. He sure could use it. He threw it at me tonight."

"He t-h-r-e-w?" Willie seemed to have trouble getting out the word.

Hartley was certain it was the first time he'd ever seen surprise on Willie's face.

"Well, one good thing about dry turkey is it doesn't stain." She shook her head. Then she noticed Hartley's wires. "You've got the Tens! How is it working?"

"I'm pleasantly surprised."

"Why? Did you figure it like faith healing or crystal mumbo jumbo or something?"

Hartley studied her face a moment, detected no sarcasm. She knew he was a hypnotist; he was thankful now he'd never told her he also sold crystals.

"Well," he said, "it's just that the pain gets pretty intense, you know, and it's hard to think this little nine-volt box can tackle it."

"Oh, it can do a terrific job," she said. "Still, from experi-

ence, I'd suggest you take your ten o'clock pain med. The thing's got limits, and most people seem to find them when they try to sleep." Laurie stretched; she had nice breasts, Hartley thought, then immediately dismissed the thought. He'd seen himself in the bathroom mirror that morning. Surgery, mandatory washing by hand, dirty hair, and fluorescent lights of precisely the right color to make a healthy person look sick made him wonder how any nurse ever fell for any patient.

"Hartley!"

Willie's voice snapped Hartley to attention.

"Is seven o'clock. Quick."

"Excuse me," Hartley said to Laurie as he began fiddling with the hospital's antiquated TV remote control. "There are priorities, and *Jeopardy* is having its Teen Tournament."

"Nurse! Oh, oh, oh God. Nurse!"

Laurie's face clenched, her eyes closed. Then she composed herself and said, "Time's up. See you later. You going to need your pain shot?"

"I think I'll take your advice. I don't want to wake up at two A.M. curled up into a little ball."

She nodded and left.

"Good woman," Willie said, then shut up.

Alex Trebek was introducing

the quarterfinalists.

Willie knew most of the answers; he beat out the fifteen-year-old champ by twenty-two hundred dollars.

Harris periodically shrieked, but it seemed Fernandez had been unofficially elected to be that night's barrier between Hartley and sleep. "Cortez!" he shouted. Something new anyway, Hartley thought. Time passed.

A rattling of dolly wheels echoed down the hall, darkened now for the night. It was ten P.M., Hartley knew. Med time. Laurie Schroeder parked the cart outside the door; Hartley could see her drawing up syringes, pouring pills into paper cups, and setting each medication down on each patient's med card.

"Nurse! Oh, my God, I need *help!*"

Hartley heard the slam of the self-locking narcotics drawer as Laurie walked toward Harris's room. Her shift lasted another hour; Hartley didn't doubt for a second that that thought had entered her head before it had his.

Willie, who'd been leaning against the door jamb, ambled outside. Hartley figured he was en route to the scale. Willie was worried about losing weight; the concern seemed to go hand in hand with his food obsession.

Eventually he returned and sprang lithely into bed, annoying Hartley even more than Fernandez' raving.

"That guy's going to keep me awake all night," he said.

"No, he won't."

Laurie paused for a few more minutes at the cart and then came in. She gave Hartley his pain shot first, then gave Willie's bony rump a dose designed to put him to sleep. That was designed, Hartley figured, more for the staff's benefit than Willie's. Otherwise Willie would regale the night shift with stories—which bothered the charge nurse most because the other nurses tended to gather around and listen.

Unexpectedly, Hartley fell into a pleasant, dreamless sleep that lasted a full nine unprecedented hours, interrupted only by the announcement of a "Code Blue" and subsequent shouting and scrambling to bring a crash cart's resuscitation gear to bear on some clinically dead neighbor.

When the turmoil subsided, Nurse Wechsln came in; Hartley liked her. She was slim, light-haired, bosomy, and talkative.

"Who got it?" he asked.

"We're not supposed to talk about things like that," she said. "It was Mr. Harris."

Hartley could hardly contain

himself; Willie seemed non-plussed. "Did you bring him back?"

Wechseln swung her head sadly; Hartley wondered how much of the remorse was real.

Hartley was more curious than anything else. Harris, after all, had been admitted for Plantar's warts, and somehow, to Hartley, recuperation from a foot operation didn't seem particularly life threatening. He found he could repress neither the cop he'd been nor the reporter he'd been. When he heard the distinctive rumble of the breakfast cart—much deeper in tone than the medicine cart—he got up and walked unnoticed into Harris's room. The corpse was already wrapped in a white shroud, its hands tied across its chest, its feet bound together. Hartley carefully unwrapped the head and looked at the dead man's dead face. It was remarkably composed—and quiet—he thought. He was about to rewrap it when he noticed a glistening on the skin of Harris's neck. He felt it. Slippery, like K-Y jelly.

He was thinking deeply by the time he reached his own room.

Willie was digging a plastic teaspoon with gusto into a grapefruit half and grinning. Hartley stood at the foot of his bed and looked at him, hard.

"So," Willie said between bites, "what bothers you? Death? I don't think Death bothers you."

"Not much," Hartley agreed. "Not usually. Not unless it's murder."

"Murder?" Willie had picked up the grapefruit half and was squeezing juice into the spoon and then slurping it until the yellow rind was bone dry.

"I know how you did it, Willie. Or mostly how you did it. But why?"

"What do you mean 'mostly'? You are better than that."

"Well, I know you used my Tens, but how did you get it off me?"

Willie grinned wickedly. "I switch syringes on Laurie's cart. You think I weigh myself only, right? You get my sleeping shot; I get your pain shot. Made me dizzy." He looked mildly surprised at that. "How did you know about the machine?"

"Harris has got electrode gook all over his neck. Why there?"

"Works there, of course. Germans did that, too. Put the wires over the neck arteries and they—" he made a fist "—squeeze closed up. Very quick. Very clean. Is why Germans don't use it often."

"I'm sure it was. But why? Why not Fernandez?"

"Mr. Fernandez does nothing wrong, Hartley," Willie patiently explained. "He talks to dead people, so what. Every week in church I talk to dead people. So?"

"So why Harris? He's been making a pain in the ass of himself for a week. It never bothered you before."

"He never threw turkey around before, did he? Hartley, you are a young man. You may not get to be old one, but even you should understand. Food, Hartley. You treat food with same reverence as death. Remember that. Besides, Mr. Harris got his wish."

Hartley looked surprised. "I'll remember," he said, going

to his own bed, his own cornflakes and banana. "But how did he get what he wanted? How do you justify this?"

"Justify? How do you need I should justify? He disrespected food. *He* justified. And like I said, he was trying to do something, and he succeeded. He needed to make an enemy. And he did. I can be a very bad enemy, Hartley."

"I'll bet you can," Hartley said, removing the stainless steel cover from his plate, wondering for the hundredth time how the hospital managed to serve five floors of patients and always get the softboiled eggs whites firm and the yolks gushy.

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(By the way, for Latin scholars: you were correct, *sine timore* means "without fear" or "without insecurity." Ablative case, of course.)



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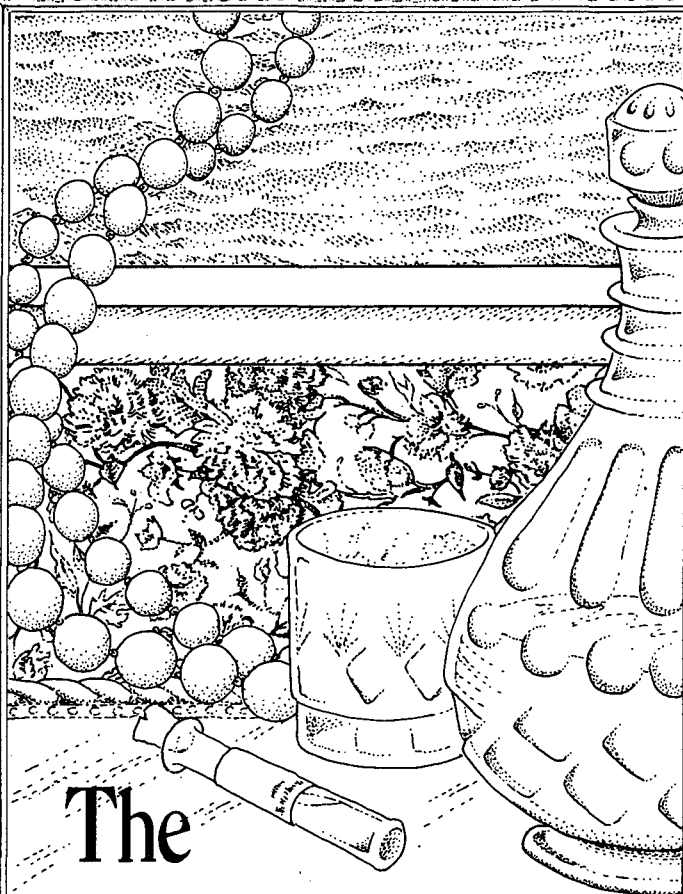
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MYSTERY CLASSIC



**The
Tragedy at St. Tropez
by Gilbert Frankau**

Illustration by Laurie Davis

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“Chi Lin, Sir Marcus,” I read out from the only English *Who’s Who* between Toulon and San Raphael. “Knight. Created 1922. Born 1868.”

“C’est lui,” said Kyra. “Tell us all it says.”

They had burst in on me, my lovely little Rumanian friend and the head of our district Secret Service, while I was breakfasting. But though I could see that both were excited, neither had vouchsafed any reason for disturbing me at so early an hour.

“Sir Marcus,” I went on, “has been twice married. The second marriage, to a Miss Selene Wu, took place three years ago. He is childless, and was educated in Shanghai—at a native university. His business is finance. He possesses about twenty English and Chinese decorations. His hobby is yachting. He gives two addresses—one in London and one in Singapore. And now tell me why you require information about this distinguished Oriental at seven thirty A.M.”

“We require it,” said Kyra, who can never resist a touch of the melodramatic, “because the big yacht which you and I saw anchor off St. Tropez yesterday evening is Sir Marcus Chi Lin’s *Sea Joy*; and because in it Sir Marcus is lying, or rather sitting, dead.”

“And he has died,” continued the *chef de la Sûreté*, who is also a bit of a melodramatist, “in circumstances which are so peculiar that the *gendarmerie* at St. Tropez had no option but to telegraph for me.”

“Are you going to tell me those circumstances?” I asked.

“We are going to do more than that,” smiled Kyra. “We are going to implore your assistance. We need an interpreter, quickly, both to help us interrogate witnesses, and to translate—” she paused, while the chief drew a paper from his pocket “—this.”

“This,” handed across my breakfast tray, proved to be a half-completed letter, headed “S.Y. *Sea Joy*,” with the previous evening’s date. Addressed, by a queer coincidence, to the head of the firm who are my own London solicitors, and marked “Confidential,” it read:

“My dear Carthers: I am sorry to trouble you. But on going through the entries in my private passbook, just received from the Bank of England, I find various checks—noticeably one for three thousand pounds, debited on May the seventh—which I cannot recollect having drawn. The passbook is enclosed. The checks about which I am doubtful, all of which you will note.

have been paid to bearer, I have starred with a red cross. As it will be at least six months before I return to England, would you mind going personally to the bank and inquiring if the clerk who paid over the money for these starred checks can possibly recollect who—

"Who got the money, of course," I explained as I finished my careful translation. "He was writing this when he died, I gather?"

"Yes," said Kyra. "Alone in the yacht's library. They found a half-empty tumbler beside him. We suspect that the tumbler contained poison. Fortunately, Dr. Lancart is holiday-making at St. Tropez. He is analyzing it for us. Now, won't you please come and interpret for us, like a dear?"

II

I continue repeating, while I remain the chronicler of her adventures, that I am not sentimentally interested in Kyra Sokratesco. Still, she certainly looked her boyish best, bare-legged, in short white skirt and thin jumper, as I took the tiller of my new twenty-knot motorboat and we shot out across the blue Mediterranean bay.

Strange, I remember thinking, that anyone so attractive should be living alone, in this out-of-the-way part of the South of France. Stranger still, that she should prefer the investigation of what is at best a sordid business, crime, to the gaieties of Paris or Cannes, of Monte Carlo or her own Bucharest.

For quite apart from the various little mysteries we have investigated together, there is also—about Kyra herself—a mystery. And perhaps a tiny hint of that mystery revealed itself to me when—pardon the pride in my recently-acquired seamanship—I brought my brand-new boat smartly to the lowered gangplank of the eight hundred ton *Sea Joy* and the three of us went aboard.

There is a way of going aboard yachts—and that way was obviously Kyra's. The captain, a grizzled man in the fifties, with lips like a rat trap, noticed it immediately. I could see, by the very salute of him, that he was impressed.

"We bring a translator," said Kyra, in her quaint English, and introduced me.

"I'm glad you've come, sir," said the captain. "Nobody on board speaks French except Sir Marcus's secretary; and his isn't up to much."

The four of us, the skipper leading, retired to his cabin. As we went, I noticed two of the local gendarmes, obviously on guard.

"Tell your friends," said Captain Middleton, once we four were seated, "that nothing's been disturbed. Nobody's been into the library. Mr. Vivian, Sir Marcus's secretary, is just having breakfast. Lady Marcus will see them if necessary. But, of course, she's a bit overcome." Then, "So that there shan't be any misunderstanding," he repeated what he knew of Sir Marcus's death.

His story was of the simplest. The *Sea Joy* had left Marseilles, where she had called only for food and letters, about eleven the previous morning. The short trip had been uneventful. At eight o'clock they had anchored off St. Tropez. At eight thirty dinner had been served to the three passengers. At ten, Sir Marcus had retired to his library. At ten thirty, his own steward had taken him his usual "grog tray." At half-past eleven, the same steward—entering to remove the grog tray—had found him at his desk, dead.

"I advised the authorities at once," ended Captain Middleton. "It's the only thing to do in foreign ports, you see. But I don't know why they're making all this fuss about things. If it's what I think it is, just an ordinary case of heart failure—"

"Leave him," interrupted Kyra in quick Rumanian, "under that impression. Tell him we want to see first the steward, then the secretary. We're expecting Dr. Lancart. Tell him the doctor is to be brought straight to this cabin as soon as he comes on board."

I transmitted these orders and could not help being aware, as I did so, of the captain's cold grey eyes, watching first Kyra, then the detective. He knows more than he'll tell, I decided, and the decision confirmed itself when the steward, straight-faced and very English, came in.

Him, too, the captain watched—anxiously, as though doubtful what he might reveal.

"I prepared Sir Marcus's tray as usual," the steward told us. "Sir Marcus always had the same things—his little whisky decanter, his little ice bucket, half a bottle of Perrier straight out of the refrigerator, and one glass. I put the tray in its usual place—on the ledge under the porthole."

"Under which porthole?" The question came from the chief. "There are two in the library."

"The starboard one, sir."

"Was it open?"

"Yes, sir. Both portholes were open."

"He says portholes." This was Kyra, again speaking Rumanian. "But they're really windows. They give straight onto the deck."

The steward, withdrawing, received the order, "Ask Sir Marcus's secretary to come up." But before the secretary put in an appearance, one of the gendarmes entered without knocking to say, "*Il y à Monsieur le Docteur Lancart. He wishes to speak privately*"—and the chief of the Sûreté, followed by Kyra, went on deck.

Alone with me, Captain Middleton's attitude was purely conventional. "A painful business," he declared. "Very painful for everybody—especially Lady Marcus." But when Kyra and the chief came back to us, I sensed perturbation in him. Nor did the shock seem entirely unanticipated when I translated: "You had better tell him the truth. Sir Marcus was poisoned. Dr. Lancart has no doubt about it. Though by what poison, we do not yet know."

"Poisoned!" was all he said. "But who could have poisoned him?"

"That," I retorted, just to see how he would take it, "is what my two friends are here to find out." He took my retort well, though I could see it worried him. But when the secretary came in, I forgot all about the captain in sheer pleased surprise.

For Vivian, Sir Marcus's secretary, and I had been at school together, and in the Far East before the war. The war had altered him, as it alters all of us. His dark hair, though still curly, had gone grey at the temples. A grey mustache covered the mouth—which I remembered as full-lipped, and slightly ascetic. He seemed to have grown taller and thinner. But his voice, and his handclasp, were the same.

"Well!" he said. "What are you doing in this *galère*, Gilbert?" And when I told him, "I'm glad. It was my idea they should get hold of somebody English. My French isn't up to official cross-examination. Not by a yard."

Vivian, always the coolest of mortals, had very little to tell us. He had been Sir Marcus's secretary ever since his marriage. On the previous evening, after Sir Marcus had retired to his library, he had sat with Lady Marcus until she went to bed at about ten thirty. He himself had been in bed by eleven. "Of course, when the skipper woke me up and told me what had happened, it was a bit of a shock."

But when, at the chief's bidding, I told him, "Look here, old chap, you'd better know everything; these friends of mine are practically certain that Sir Marcus was poisoned," his coolness left him—and he could only stammer, "Poisoned. Poisoned. Good God!"

"This is too ghastly," he said when he had recovered himself. "Has Lady Marcus been told yet?"

"No." I spoke in English. "Nobody knows except yourself and the captain."

"And nobody shall know," chipped in Kyra—also speaking English—"until we have made search of the ship." Then, to me in French, she went on. "Ask him if he knows the whereabouts of Sir Marcus's bankbooks, who has charge of the money on board, and where Sir Marcus usually kept his personal keys."

"Sir Marcus," answered Vivian, "always kept his personal keys on him. You will find them, I imagine, attached to his watch chain. His bankbooks he kept in the middle drawer of the bureau at which he died. The money on board, which was made up to the full two hundred pounds at Marseilles yesterday, is in the safe in the dining salon. The safe is a letter-lock one, of which only Sir Marcus and myself knew the combination."

"Write down the combination, please," demanded the *chef de la Sûreté*—and after Vivian had written it for him, the search began.

I did not take part in that search. Neither did Vivian. We sat alone, in the captain's cabin, for the best part of two hours. And it was only towards the end of those two hours that I became aware of Vivian's nervousness; that it seemed to me that he, in the same way as Captain Middleton, knew more than he would tell. Every now and again, too, he seemed to be on the verge of some confidence, and once, when I said, "I hope to goodness they don't give me the job of breaking the truth to Lady Marcus," the queerest look betrayed itself in his dark eyes.

"Yes," he said slowly, "that'll be a rotten job, whoever has to do it." And after that a constraint fell between us, so that I felt glad, almost inordinately so, to see Kyra at the door.

Kyra came through the door, which was curtained, alone. Her mood seemed almost nonchalant. She nodded pleasantly to Vivian, saying, "Excuse us, won't you?" as she drew me outside. But once outside, her mood, indeed her whole face, changed.

"That man," she said quickly. "Is he a friend of yours? Have you known him long? Tell me all you know about him. Has he ever been in the East?"

"He was in the East three years, rubber planting," I began. "He's a gentleman by birth—with a little money of his own, I imagine. A bit of a rolling stone. But nothing against him. A very ordinary English public school type."

"Married?" asked Kyra.

"No."

"*Pour les femmes?*"

(The French phrase is untranslatable.)

"I should say not."

"But no St. Anthony?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. It would depend on circumstances. But what the blazes are you driving at, Kyra?"

"Hold thy tongue. *Tache da lingua!*" she whispered suddenly—and as she did so the curtain rustled over the doorway of the captain's cabin and a shadow fell between us on the deck.

The shadow was a woman's, and a whiff of exotic perfume accompanied it, and a minute later, Vivian, emerging from the cabin, had presented us to his employer's wife.

To write that Lady Marcus Chi Lin was beautiful would be an understatement. She possessed that rare exquisiteness which is sometimes given to the half-caste, and her eyes were the almonds of the East. Age, she had none, though I judged her nearing the thirties. Her European yachting costume was of the simplest, but pearls worth many thousands glistened at the lotus flower of her throat.

"I came to find you, Charles," she said, having acknowledged our presentation without a handshake. "My *amah*" (maid) "tells me that there are policemen on board, that they are searching all the cabins.

"Will you please inform me, and at once, why?"

There was something regal about Lady Marcus, and we must have stood before her, all three of us, for the best part of fifteen seconds, silent, looking like courtiers—that is to say, like fools. Then, swiftly, before either Vivian or myself could stop her, Kyra said, in that broken English of hers: "We search the ship, my lady, because somebody have poisoned your husband—and we must know who."

What Kyra expected, I discovered later. What I expected was a shriek, a fainting fit. What actually happened was a perfect exhibition of Oriental self-control. Nothing about Lady Marcus displayed the slightest emotion. Hands, lips, eyelids, cheek muscles—every feature, in that supreme instant, might have been carved stone.

"You are sure of this," she said at last.

"Quite sure, my lady."

"Then find me the poisoner, and quickly, so that he too may die."

III

On the Côtes des Maures, where murder is an everyday commonplace, thieving only another name for business, and the coins current of every man's conversation the quarter-truth, the half-truth, and the full downright lie, one decency of civilization is nevertheless sacred—and that, the midday meal.

We took ours—Kyra, the chief, and I—at the villa, all embowered with bougainvillea, which Dr. Lancart, the famous Parisian analyst, had taken for his holiday, and suddenly converted to his work.

There were test tubes and an electric heater on the side table of the one living room and every now and then the little ferret-eyed scientist jumped up from his bouillabaisse to see how the work went on.

"I lack everything," he kept on saying. "The fool chemist here has none of the reagents." And every time he said this, the chief and Kyra looked at one another—the semblance of a twinkle in their eyes. But whenever they looked at me, their eyes were doubtful, and when, our meal over and coffee on the table, the chief produced a tiny phial from his pocket saying: "Perhaps this will help you, doctor. We found it in the yacht's safe while we were searching," I seemed to understand why.

For the phial had a tiny Chinese label on it, and Dr. Lancart, who had practiced several years in Saigon, recognized it instantly—and, apart from the dead man, only Vivian ("He was in the East three years rubber planting," I heard myself say to Kyra) knew the combination of the safe.

Yet that Vivian should be even suspected of such a murder seemed to me an outrage. For though our old school had seen more than one of its alumni in broad arrows, none so far has merited the poisoner's rope.

The doctor, with the contents of the phial to guide him, took a bare half hour more to reach certitude. "I will perform the post-mortem this evening," he said. "But there is no doubt in my mind as to the result of it. If you can prove opportunity and motive, you need not hesitate to arrest."

"And opportunity," said the chief, "was ample. The steward set down the tray by an open window. Motive, too, may be provable."

But because an English boat is English territory, it seemed to me, as I followed Kyra into the sunshine, that he would have to consult the Parquet (the office of the Procureur de la République)

before arresting, and, strong in that half-knowledge, I detained the pair of them in the doctor's porch.

"One moment, my friends," I said. "If you want more help from me, if you want me to go back to the *Sea Joy* with you, let us be explicit with one another. Tell me precisely what else you found when you searched this morning—and tell me, very precisely, what you suspect."

The chief—whose appearance, I repeat, I have promised not to describe in these chronicles—hesitated, murmuring that the position was "a little delicate." Kyra, however, retorting, "Delicate or not, *mon ami*, he knows too much not to know the rest of it," told me the truth. They had found the bankbook, with the red stars against the doubtful entries, easily; the phial, which was a tiny one, only by supreme luck—wedged, as it had been, between the back and the binding of another book, obviously kept by Vivian and marked, "Ship's Cash."

"There was the faintest bulge in the back of the binding," said Kyra. "But only the faintest one. As for what we suspect, that is—alas!—obvious. Whether you go on helping us or not, depends—I should say—on your feeling for *him*."

IV

Whether or no I was ethically right in returning to the *Sea Joy* is open to discussion. That I could not prevent myself doing so is positive fact. I know Kyra's methods, you see; and I knew, or thought I knew, the exact line she and the chief would take in their further examination of the man who, whatever there might be against him, had still been my pal.

Once a pal, always a pal, I remember thinking. Vivian couldn't possibly have done this thing. And at least I can take care, when they are putting their questions, that they don't lay any trap.

But once we were back in Captain Middleton's cabin, it was not, to my surprise, Vivian, but Lady Marcus whom the chief, after a low-voiced consultation with Kyra, elected to see.

Lady Marcus entered with perfect self-possession, requesting only that Captain Middleton should leave us before the questions began.

"He was my husband's servant," she explained after he had left us. "And though he was a most faithful one, I would rather not speak before servants." An explanation which prejudiced me against her from the first.

Prejudice, however—during the hour we had her under examination—was the least of the feelings I experienced about Lady Marcus Chi Lin. That she had a rare beauty, I acknowledge. That she answered my questions freely, intelligently, and with a great semblance of honesty, I acknowledge also. But—to use a forthright vulgarism—she gave me the creeps. And most of all did she give me the creeps when, right at the end, I put the inevitable, “You mustn’t be offended, Lady Marcus. But my friends are very anxious to know whether you and your husband have always been on the best of terms?”

“Always,” she asseverated. “Marcus and I adored each other. No other man ever interested me in the slightest. I used to tell Marcus everything. Even when other men tried to flirt with me, even when Charles—”

She bit her lip on the “Charles”; and I fancied, from a look which passed between us, that she wished me to slur the point over. But Kyra’s sharp ears had fastened on it—and in two more questions, the thing was out.

Charles Vivian had been in love with his employer’s wife. At any rate, he had tried to flirt with her. She had told Sir Marcus about it. Sir Marcus had wanted to get rid of Vivian. “But I persuaded him not to. Charles was so useful, you see. And when he saw I had no intention of—of flirting back at him, he left off.”

“Did Vivian know that you had told your husband, Lady Marcus?”

“I’m not certain. He may have.”

“And how long ago did this happen?”

“Oh, just before we left England, in May.”

Sir Marcus Chi Lin’s widow, having made this statement, left us—Kyra and the chief satisfied, me in gloom.

“A double motive,” said Kyra. “Sex—as always. And money—if it was he who cashed the checks.” Then she asked me to fetch Captain Middleton, whom I found just outside the door.

“Ask the captain,” she demanded, “to be very frank with us. Has he noticed, since leaving England, anything peculiar about the relations between Lady Marcus and her husband’s secretary?”

“Isn’t that rather a brutal question?” I protested.

“You need not put it brutally.” Kyra’s lovely eyes hardened. “But in the interests of justice, we must know.”

So I put the question, or rather a series of questions, after my own fashion and succeeded at last in extorting a very reluctant, “I

should say, though of course there was nothing wrong about it, that Lady Marcus was very fond of Mr. Vivian. They used to be a lot together—especially when Sir Marcus was working. I should say, though, that on the whole she liked him more than he liked her.”

Middleton, despite a good deal of quiet pressure, refused to add anything to this statement. “I oughtn’t to have said as much as I have done,” he protested. “If it hadn’t have been for you, I’d have held my tongue altogether. Because I don’t trust foreigners. And that’s a fact.”

Meanwhile “the foreigners”—I could see—had been a little shaken. If one were to believe the captain, Lady Marcus had lied to us. And if Lady Marcus had lied to us—

“She’s half Chinese,” said Kyra—displaying yet more of that racial prejudice which is so unfortunate for the internationalist. “If your friend rebuffed her, out of loyalty to his employer; if she wanted to marry him—”

“If she wanted to marry him,” cut in the chief, “she would hardly try to have him guillotined as a preliminary. To me what is really important is that we find out who forged the checks.”

Then, again murmuring about “the delicacy of the position,” he asked me if I had any objection to putting a few further questions to Vivian, to which I replied, “None at all. Provided the questions are fair ones—and provided that you will do nothing more than keep him under surveillance until we have had time to communicate with my solicitor, Mr. Carthers, who will probably come over personally when he knows what has occurred.”

The chief demurred—as I had expected him to. Kyra, however, took my side, saying, “Our position, too, is a little delicate. Whoever we arrest may claim the right to be tried in England”; and I got my way. Also, knowing the irregularity, to English ideas, of Kyra’s and the chief’s methods, I insisted on being allowed to warn Vivian of what he must expect.

He came in a little later, perturbed but not unduly so considering the circumstances, and I warned him that, Dr. Lancart’s having confirmed the fact of the poisoning, everybody on the yacht was bound to be more or less under suspicion until the matter had been cleared up.

“Including myself?” he asked.

“I’m afraid so, old chap.”

“Well, it’s natural, I suppose. Though, of course *you* must know

I didn't do it. With Sir Marcus dead, I'm left with about a hundred a year and my wound pension. Tell your friends to keep that in their minds, won't you? And now, fire ahead."

I translated—and put the chief's first question. "You kept the yacht's cashbook. The cashbook was in the safe of which you gave us the combination. Are you quite sure that nobody except yourself and Sir Marcus knew that combination?"

"I'm very nearly positive. Sir Marcus had it changed before we left London."

"Could Lady Marcus have known it?"

"No." Vivian answered instantly. "Certainly not."

"He told us before luncheon—" it was still the chief, notebook on knee, speaking "—that Lady Marcus went to bed at about ten thirty; he himself at eleven. Ask him if he can remember his movements during that half hour."

"I remained in the saloon," answered Vivian, "reading—one of your books as it happened, old man. When I'd finished it I turned straight in."

Half a dozen questions, all more or less along the same lines, followed. Then, abruptly, Kyra took a hand.

"*Je pense*," she said, speaking French very slowly, and looking towards Vivian as she did so, "that you had better tell your friend everything, in your own manner. What we have discovered, we have discovered. It is for him to explain it—if he can."

"Everything?" I asked.

"Yes. Everything. You made a condition that the examination should be a fair one. Could anything be fairer than to tell this gentleman about the letter, about the passbook, about the little phial we found, and—" Kyra, still looking at Vivian, spoke more slowly than ever "—about Lady Marcus's statement that he flirted with her, and Captain Middleton's statement that it was she, rather, who flirted with him?"

A silence followed, and during that silence I saw Vivian change color; saw one little greasy bead of perspiration break out on his cheek.

"Could anything be fairer?" repeated Kyra.

"I—I suppose not," I admitted—and for a good ten minutes, feeling as uncomfortable as I have ever felt in my existence, I spoke with Vivian as only one man of the same race can speak to another, when there is need.

He heard me out unflinching, but I was aware, as I explained

about the checks and the poison phial, of stark amazement in him; and when I came to his relations with Lady Marcus, of fear. After I had finished, he was like a man stricken with aphasia. His lips moved—but for many seconds he could not speak.

“What—what the hell’s a fellow to do?” he said at last. “You say you’re going to write to Carthers. You needn’t. I cashed that bearer check for three thousand on May the seventh. The others, too. I always cashed his checks for him. But they were all right. Sir Marcus signed them, and he had the money for them. As for the poison, I swear to God I never even knew he had been poisoned, till you told me this morning. And there’s nothing between me and Lady Marcus. Nothing, I tell you. Nothing on earth!”

And Vivian, his grey eyebrows twitching, added: “For God’s sake believe me, old chap. Because—because any fool could see that those two don’t.”

V

I think, looking back a whole year on what was at best a sorry business, that I—even though I obeyed the chief’s order and kept away from the *Sea Joy*—always did believe in Vivian’s innocence. But that evening, as Kyra and the chief and I sat on my terrace watching the lights of St. Tropez glimmer across two miles of silent water, my belief in him may have been a little shaken. And two evenings later, when I sat in the same place with Carthers, arrived posthaste from London, it was more shaken still.

“I can’t agree with you,” said Carthers. “The sex motive, though obscure, seems ample. He admits he cashed the checks. Whether they were forged or not is immaterial. He could easily have induced Sir Marcus to sign them. And nobody had a better opportunity of dropping this poison, which is apparently odorless, into the glass.”

“Circumstantial evidence,” I protested.

“More than that. The discovery of the phial—”

“Proves nothing. He could far more easily have dropped it overboard.”

“But he didn’t. He was afraid of its being washed ashore. And tomorrow, whether for trial in France or for extradition, he’ll be arrested.”

Whereupon Carthers, tired with his twenty-four hour journey, went up to bed.

I went up to bed, too. But there was no sleep in me. I just sat at my window—staring, staring, staring at the riding light of the *Sea*

Joy. And as I stared, my brain worked, and my blood shrank back into a heart sick with apprehension—till on a sudden, I saw the other light. The other light was dead under the *Sea Joy's* riding light, almost at water level. It winked—and kept on winking. Till presently I began to read.

"G.F.," read the light. "G.F. S.O.S.G.F." And when I had got my own torch, it signaled: "S.W.I.M.M.I.N.G. C.O.M.E. S.H.O.R.E."

My Morse, after ten years' disuse, was rusty. But I remembered the okay; and sent it; and five minutes later I stole—stole is the only word for it—out of my house.

It is no distance, if you take the path over the golf course, from my house to the Beauvallon foreshore. But the moon was still up—so I went by the pinewoods, telling myself that there could be no hurry because Vivian's swim from St. Tropez would take him, even if he made it, at least an hour.

I remember how, as I reached the foreshore, I was afraid he might not make it. I remember wondering whether I should get my boat out, and being afraid again—lest the boat should betray us to some watcher. In fact, I was in a pretty panic by the time the last rays of moonlight showed me the shadow of Vivian's swimming head.

He shivered as he came out of the warm water, and the breath whistled through his teeth.

"Good of you," he whispered. "I thought you'd be coming on board again. I tried to write you. I tried to come over this afternoon. But those gendarmes wouldn't let me. Haven't got a spot of brandy, have you? I—I'll need it before we talk."

There is always drink, and a change of clothing, in my boathouse. I led Vivian there, found him flannels and a sweater, and set drink before him—in the dark.

"Carthers must be here," he began. "I overheard some talk about the *avocat anglais*. Does he think I'm guilty?"

"He—" I hesitated.

"All right." The teeth had ceased their chattering. "You needn't make any bones about it. I'm as good a judge of evidence as the next fellow, and Selene—"

"Selene!"

"Lady Marcus. Hell holds no fury, old chap! You know the rest of the quotation. But thank your stars you don't know what it means to a fellow, when he can only hold a thousand-a-year job by playing Joseph to a half-caste . . ."

He told me exactly what holding such a job meant; but because that part is real life, and not fiction, I have cut it out.

"One couldn't tell that to a jury, could one?" he ended. "At the best, they'd only think she and I were accomplices. And besides, there's no earthly proof. The letter was too well forged, you see. And poor old Marcus'll never let on now, how she wheedled the combination out of him. Or what he did with the three thousand, either. And, and, oh damn it, Gilbert, what's the use of pretending? I loved her—even if I wouldn't behave like a blackguard to poor old Marcus. I love her still, even if she is trying to have me guillotined. And that's why—that's why *you've* got to help me. Because nobody else can."

My wife, usually the most tractable of women, found it almost impossible to forgive me the loss of our brand-new twenty-knotter. Carthers, to whom, from the very moment the theft was discovered, she never ceased appealing, "Would any man in his senses leave a motorboat which cost a thousand pounds lying about loose with enough petrol in her tanks to cross the Mediterranean?" contented himself with a malicious, "No doubt, Mrs. Frankau, your husband's loss will be made good by his insurance company." The two gendarmes on board the *Sea Joy* lost their chances of promotion. The *chef de la Sûreté*, after one of the most fruitless inquiries in police history, departed for Toulon. And Kyra—whose friendship, though always platonic, is always precious to me—sulked like a spoiled princess.

"Never again, my friend," said Kyra, sulking, the night after the *Sea Joy* had sailed for England, in my library. "Me you cannot fool. How it was done, I know not. But you had a hand in it. And he was guilty. He merited the death penalty. His flight alone proves it. Though she, too, that sly one, is not altogether blameless. In all crime where there is a sex motive—"

"Sex motive," I interrupted. "Or race motive." And because any Boswell may be proud of outdistancing his Doctor Johnson, I could not help feeling a little superior as I took a thin book printed on vellum from my pocket, and read the first paragraph of that thousand-year-old story which begins: "In the great walled city of Soochow lived Wong Whei Yui, the rich old merchant; and his lovely young wife, Peach Blossom, and Wen Chen Ming, the servant of Wong Whei Yui, who was also his friend."

"What on earth?" began Kyra.

But I silenced her, and read on.

"Now the young wife of Wong Whei Yui," I read, "fell amorous of Wen Chen Ming, who would have none of her. But Wong Whei Yui, not knowing this, imagined that Wen Chen Ming had betrayed him. And because, in that age which the scribes of Far Cathay call golden, no man might kill with his own hand, however great the wrong suffered; and because moreover it seemed to Wong Whei Yui that life without the love of Peach Blossom were better ended, he ended his life—doing so in such a way, for he was a man of great cunning, that suspicion for his death should fall upon his friend. And after Wong Whei Yui's death, Peach Blossom, about whom the story is told, being still angry with Wen Chen Ming, who had rebuffed her, forgot that it is written, 'Who does not help the innocent is himself guilty.' And she—"

I did not, however, succeed in finishing that thousand-year-old story because Kyra snatched the book from me; and when she had reread those opening paragraphs, picking her way very slowly through the quaint English, her face lost something of its loveliness—going, indeed, almost grey before my eyes.

"Did—did *he* know this?" she stammered.

"Wen Chen Ming thought Peach Blossom guilty," I answered.

"And you?"

"The book only came yesterday."

"Then why?"

"Why what, Kyra?"

"Why did you—why was your motorboat—"

"Sheer carelessness, Kyra."

"You—you needn't lie to me. He was your friend—"

"Sheer carelessness, I repeat, Kyra."

"No. No. No. It wasn't. It was—"

And before I could quite realize what had happened, Kyra had seized both my hands and was kissing them, sobbing as she did so: "Providence, Gilbert. Providence! God forgive me. It was suicide. And I—I'd have had an innocent man guillotined for it, just—just to keep myself from being bored."

Which last, though a trifle disingenuous on Kyra's part, is no bad reason for becoming a detective—or for reading about one, if it comes to that.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



Taylor McCafferty brings back private eye Haskell Blevins of Pigeon Fork, Kentucky, in the second of her series, **Ruffled Feathers** (Pocket, \$4.50, 212 pp). Haskell is still sweeping out his brother's drugstore in order to keep the wolf from the door because, even though he did solve the murder of an old lady, her cat, and her parakeet (in *Pet Peeves*), most residents of Pigeon Fork can see no earthly need for a paid detective. When wealthy Jacob Vandeventer fears that his daughter Priscilla may be a target of kidnappers, however, he hires Haskell to act as a bodyguard. Unfortunately, it isn't Priscilla's desire to have a bodyguard, and Haskell's presence does not prevent Jacob's murder. Motives within the Vandeventer family abound, and Haskell is again investigating; after all, even though he hadn't been hired to protect Jacob, the murder had occurred "on his watch," and he feels that he must clear his reputation.

The Sacrilege by John Maddox Roberts (Avon, \$4.50, 224 pp) is the third in his "SPQR" series, featuring Decius Metellus the Younger, fledgling senator and expert detector of crime. Decius is asked to act for a politician friend of Decius the Elder; what is required is an investigation of the willingness of a possible running mate. This investigation involves attending banquets and private gatherings, and at one particularly degenerate party, a corrupt politician is poisoned with a pastry apparently meant for Decius. What follows is an infiltration of men into a religious rite restricted to married females, three more murders, and rumors of a plot against the lawful government. Decius is hot on the trail of the culprits because if he doesn't find them, he may be killed himself.

Blood Feud by Elizabeth Quinn (Pocket, \$4.95, 374 pp) pits Toni Ross, policewoman and daughter of a famous Italian restaurateur, against the Mafia when she is assigned to guard Veronica Aiello Lipari, daughter of the current don and possible witness against the don in a trial that could break up the family. The real question is whether or not Veronica really intends to testify against her father—and why her brother is so solicitous of her well-being. Toni begins to suspect that there is more to this case than simply witness protection, and returns to her old neighborhood and family to gain insight into Veronica's motives.

Robert Randisi and Marilyn Wallace have collaborated as editors in compiling the stories for **Deadly Allies** (Doubleday Perfect Crime, \$18.50, 370 pp). The premise behind this collection is a pairing of a member of the Private Eye Writers of America (who specialize in the American P.I. story) and a member of Sisters in Crime (who were formed to promote books by women) in story-sets with common threads. For example, Jeremiah Healy's "Summary Judgment" and Lia Matera's "Easy Go" share a legal theme that is lent authenticity by the legal backgrounds of both authors; John Lutz and Margaret Maron explore the concept of "what's in a name?" in "Before You Leap" and "Hangnail," respectively; Rob Kantner and Marilyn Wallace uncover long-buried lies in "Unfinished Business" and "Reunion"; and Sandra Scoppettone's "Like Father, Like Daughter" and Robert J. Randisi's "Turnabout" investigate "families." While the concept implies a contrast between members of the two writers' groups, what the reader may be pleasantly surprised to find is that it is not immediately obvious who belongs to which group.

Elizabeth George writes what many describe as suspense novels, but there is mystery here as well. **For the Sake of Elena** (Bantam, \$20, 388 pp) follows Detective Inspector Thomas Lynley and Detective Sergeant Barbara Havers in their investigation of the savage murder of Elena Weaver, daughter of a respected scholar at Cambridge, struggling student with only a few facets of her character revealed to any of her classmates, and enigma to all involved. When a second student who resembles Elena is also murdered, fear of a serial killer begins to stalk Cambridge, but Lynley and Havers see deeper motives and alternative explanations. Lynley handles most of the investigation, since Havers is trying to care for her senile mother and deal with the guilt she is feeling about wanting to institutionalize her.

John Harvey's **Off Minor** (Henry Holt, \$18.95, 274 pp) is the fourth in his Charlie Resnick series. In this installment, Resnick finds himself drawn into the investigation of a missing little girl named Emily Morrison. Emily's stepmother last saw her in the small side yard, and fears that Emily's distraught mother has taken her. But Resnick sees a connection with the disappearance of a little girl from a playground some two months earlier. That little girl was found dead, and Resnick fears a pattern that goes deeper than child custody squabbles. The effects of the two disappearances on the two somewhat disparate families, the setting in a down-and-out English city, and the drudgery of the police procedure in the locating of a missing person lend real substance to this book.

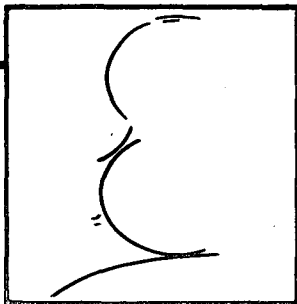
A Slash of Scarlet (Putnam, \$19.95, 233 pp) is the second in Nancy Baker Jacobs' series featuring investigator Devon MacDonald. Devon has been hired by some wealthy young widows who have, each in turn, fallen for and been swindled by the same con man. Devon is asked to track him down and get back their money and possessions. She poses as a wealthy widow to entrap the con man, and succeeds in embroiling herself in a murder investigation in Monterey, California.

Gillian B. Farrell was an aspiring actress. When she went to New York, she needed a "survival" job, but she didn't take on the usual one of driving a cab or waiting tables; she became a detective. And now she is an author, with **Alibi for an Actress** (Pocket, \$19, 250 pp). In this book, Annie Grogan sells her acting skills to "Duke" DeNobili, P.I.—she feels that her ability to act, to disguise, to blend in or stand out, will make her a good investigator. DeNobili, impressed with her assertiveness, takes her on for a protection assignment one evening; the assignment results in Annie's becoming a witness for the defense in a murder trial and, subsequently, an investigator into who "really done it." Farrell has turned out an interesting first novel based on her own experiences.

Annette Meyers' **Blood on the Street** (Doubleday Perfect Crime, \$18.50, 327 pp) partners headhunters Xenia Smith and Leslie Wetzon in a search for the murderer of a stockbroker they had recently placed in a new position. Wall Street ambiance, Smith and Wetzon's conflicts both in and out of the office, and competition with a former employee who has set himself up in the headhunter business using connections he built while at Smith and Wetzon all spice this classic whodunit.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Jack Ryan, the CIA hero created by bestselling author Tom Clancy, is back on the screen in **Patriot Games**. But a few changes have taken place since he last flirted with danger in the underwater thriller *The Hunt for Red October*. Instead of working to make the world safe for democracy, he merely has to make it safe for his wife and daughter. Unfortunately for him, it's not as simple as it seems.

Alec Baldwin, who starred as Ryan in the first film, has been replaced by screen heavyweight Harrison Ford because of scheduling conflicts. That turns out to be a plus.

In real life, the Cold War is finally finished. In reel life this time, the target of Ryan's wrath is a breakaway, radical band of IRA terrorists—one gunman in particular—who

are looking to harm his family.

Newly retired from the Agency, Ryan gets into this perilous predicament when, during a family trip to England where he's lecturing, he finds himself standing on a London street when a terrorist attack unfolds in front of him. The intended target of the attack is a member of the royal family.

Ryan is unable to merely watch. After yelling to his wife and daughter to get down, he springs into action with a flying tackle and several well-placed shots, which kill one of the ski-masked gunmen.

While police rush to the bloody scene, Jack Ryan and the surviving terrorist, whose mates have abandoned him, eyeball each other with some intensity.

It seems that Ryan, now a teacher, has taught gunman Sean Miller (Sean Bean) a les-

son: Don't bring your baby brother along on a dangerous mission. He might wind up dead.

For his heroic deed, Ryan's picture is in all the British papers, which extol the "American tourist" who is also a former Marine.

Ryan's testimony helps convict Sean Miller. After testifying, Ryan and his perfect family return to their idyllic home on the Maryland shore. Their house is of course quite isolated, making it all the more vulnerable.

When brother Miller is freed from prison in a spectacularly staged and jarringly ruthless break, the battle lines are drawn and we can fasten our seat belts for the inexorably moving confrontation between Ryan and Miller. Only this time, terror comes to Ryan's own back yard.

While it's somewhat predictable that Ryan and Miller will duke it out in the end, how they get there is quite interesting.

Unlike *The Hunt for Red October*, *Patriot Games* does not bog down with needless technical jargon. And while there is a liberal sprinkling of computer-raised clues, they are out of the ordinary and don't cause a viewer to nod off as soon as the film turns to the tapping of computer keys.

Aside from the violence and

the computers, there is Ryan's family to look at. Cathy Ryan (Anne Archer), Jack's wife, is a doctor. She treats her husband on the scene of the London attack, when he's shot.

Little Sally Ryan (Thora Birch) is adorable and innocent. A scene in which Harrison Ford's character reads *The Cat in the Hat* to her while she lies in a hospital bed is touching, even if he does read in a monotone, while boiling to get even.

Harrison Ford is believable as a family man. He adores his daughter and pays attention to her even when he's got other things on his mind—such as how to prevent her from getting killed. He doesn't smile a lot; his emotion comes right from his eyes. He even sheds a few tears in this one.

Perhaps the best performance comes from Sean Bean, who plays Ryan's main adversary. He speaks few words, fires many bullets, and acts like a guy you wouldn't want to run into even in broad daylight on a crowded street, never mind a dark alley somewhere.

Director Phillip Noyce, who also brought us *Dead Calm*, often focuses his camera on Bean's or Ford's face, or on some of the other interesting characters. He also manages to keep things suspenseful despite a somewhat predictable story.

THE STORY THAT WON



The May Mysterious Photo-

Thomas Buice of Belleview, go to Shauna I. Sutliff of New Glovsky of Ashland, Wisconsin; William F. Smith of Garden Grove, California; D. B. Hall of Chilli-

cothe, Ohio; Yvette M. Christofilis of White Plains, New York; Andrew W. Paterson of Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, Canada; A. C. Stone of Windsor, Ontario, Canada; Andy Dequasie of Pownal, Vermont; Emily A. Plummer of Calistoga, California; Deborah Elliott Upton of Amarillo, Texas; Jeffery R. Cook of Genoa City, Wisconsin; Carla Manley of Eugene, Oregon; and Kay Kalabokis of Chicago, Illinois.

graph contest was won by Florida. Honorable mentions York, New York; Norman E. sin; Gail L. Rouskey of Ash-

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

BIRTH OF A CRY WOLF COMPLEX by Thomas Buice

John pulled the passenger door of their patrol car shut. Stone-faced, Al got in the driver's seat on the other side. They were leaving behind several units from their vice squad and a group of bewildered teenagers. John wanted to apologize, but knew better than to try. Finally, the dreaded moment came when Al broke the silence.

"Big drug bust, you said. Kids getting high, you said. Wads of money, you said. Angel dust and coke, you said. Promotion to lieutenant, you said.

"And what did we find?" Al continued. "An enterprising bunch of kids gathering pop bottles from a construction site where the laborers had tossed them. Getting high? Yeah, some kids were on the third floor. Coke? Yeah, and a few Pepsis, too. Money? A whopping ten cents per bottle. Promotion? We'll be lucky if we still have a job tomorrow.

"Next time you get a hot tip on that cheap little walkie-talkie of yours," Al growled, "please keep it to yourself."

Sullenly, John sat wondering if he should say anything about the coven with the human sacrifice scheduled tonight at Vixen Creek. Nah, probably just some sort of kids' game.



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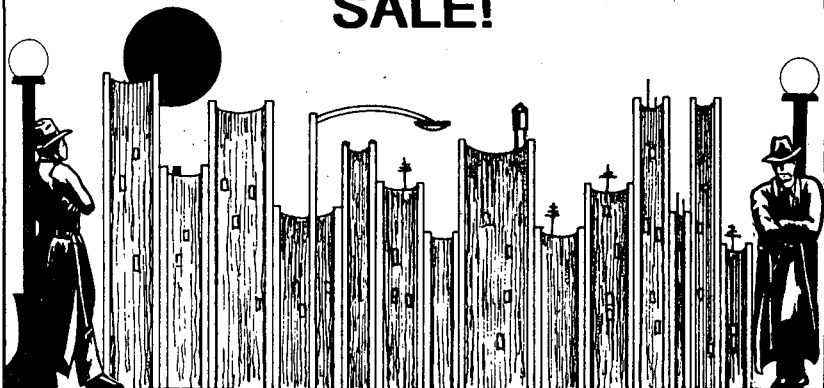
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